

# Chemical Weapons in Syria: Oct-Dec 2013

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## Foreword

My previous [essay](#) on Syria discussed the threat of U.S. military strikes on Syria and the diplomatic agreement to remove all chemical weapons from Syria, covering dates from 8 Sep 2013 to 5 Oct 2013. In particular, my previous essay:

- discussed the aborted proceedings in the U.S. Congress on the approval of Obama's request to use a military strike to punish the Syrian government for using allegedly chemical weapons on 21 Aug.
- discussed the 16 Sep report of United Nations Inspectors that concludes chemical weapons were used in Syria on 21 Aug.
- explained the Russian concern with the export of experienced terrorists from Syria (20 Sep) and tersely — and incompletely — discusses the scourge of Islamic terrorism.
- discussed the evolution of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118.
- and explained why I believe peace negotiations are futile with the current conditions in Syria.

This current essay covers dates from 6 Oct 2013 to 31 Dec 2013. Like my previous essay, this current essay collects contemporary facts, opinions, quotations, links to news reports and documents, and adds my comments. By preserving details in one place, I hope to create a

resource for historians.

This essay is divided into two parts. The [first part](#) chronicles the history of destroying chemical weapons in Syria, with occasional mentions of atrocities by jihadists and Al-Qaeda in Syria, and occasional mentions of politics at the United Nations. The [second part](#) chronicles the preparations for the Geneva2 peace conference, the disorganization of the Syrian National Coalition, the role of Assad in the future government of Syria, and the politics of the peace process.

I am trying to write a history of this topic, and that requires presenting opinions of people with whom I personally disagree, or who I believe are untrustworthy. The fact that a politician or diplomat says something does *not* make his/her statement true.

Because news media in the USA often ignore details of what is happening in Syria, at least twice a day I checked both (1) the Middle East webpage of *Al-Jazeera* and (2) the homepage of *Al-Arabiya*. If they had a news story about Syria, then I followed their citations to Reuters in England or Agence France-Presse, to get the original story. However, apparently not every news story in the Arabic Agence France-Press is translated to English.

When I was a full-time student in universities during 1967-77, I learned not to write documents full of facts, without also explaining the significance of those facts and drawing conclusions from those facts. In that spirit, I include my opinions in this essay, to show the reader omissions, inconsistencies, propaganda, and other defects in the conventional wisdom or in journalists' reports.

I am [aware](#) of "link rot" — the failure of links owing to a webmaster who either (1) moved old webpages to a new location, or (2) deleted old webpages. Such actions by webmasters frustrate users of the Internet, who depend on stable links. In writing this essay, I often cite multiple news sources, in the hope that at least one of those links will still function in the future. Link rot is a problem created by webmasters, and the solution to this problem lies with those webmasters.

In early December 2013, [france24.com](#) stopped posting Agence-France Presse wire news stories at its website. This was a significant loss of information for this essay.

### **Terse Summary of Syria Fighters**

There are three groups of people fighting against the legitimate government of Assad in Syria. The so-called "rebels" are moderates, many of whom are part of the Free Syrian Army. Second, the "jihadists" want to impose an Islamic government on Syria. And, third, there are at least two Al-Qaeda affiliated groups — i.e., (1) the al-Nusra Front and (2) the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — fighting in Syria. The USA and Western Europe would prefer that the rebels win, although military aid to the rebels has been withheld because of fears that donated weapons and munitions would eventually be acquired by either the jihadists or Al-Qaeda. The rebels are frequently described by two words: "fragmented" and "disorganized".

Beginning in September 2013, the rebels are also frequently characterized as "disillusioned". Since October 2013, many smaller rebel groups have been leaving the Free Syrian Army and joining the jihadists.

#### Government

The Arab nations, Western Europe, and the USA recognize the Syrian National Coalition, an exile group in Turkey, as the *only* legitimate government of Syria. However, there are hundreds of rebel and jihadist groups operating in Syria, and the Coalition represents only some of the rebel groups and none of the jihadists. As explained in detail [below](#), the Coalition is unable to make decisions, and — in my opinion — has no credibility as a future government of Syria. However, there is no other alternative government for Syria. During October to December 2013, as explained below, several commentators have noted that Assad is preferable to having Al-Qaeda control Syria.

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## History During 6-19 Oct 2013: Destruction of Chemical Weapons And Some Atrocities in Syria

### 6 Oct 2013

In glad news, OPCW reported that they had begun destroying Syrian chemical weapons facilities:

The process of destroying Syria's chemical weapons programme began today. Under the supervision of experts from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, supported by the United Nations, Syrian personnel used cutting torches and angle grinders to destroy or disable a range of items. This included missile warheads, aerial bombs and mixing and filling equipment. The process will continue in the coming days.

International inspectors from the OPCW supported by a team from the UN are monitoring, verifying and reporting on Syria's compliance with international demands to destroy chemical weapons stockpiles and production facilities.

[OPCW](#), 6 Oct 2013.

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RIA-Novosti reported:

A group of 14 experts is expected to join a team of the global chemical weapons watchdog in Syria next week [13-18 Oct], and the total number of experts will reach 100 in three or four weeks, a military source in Damascus told RIA Novosti.

Last week, a group of 33 experts from Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Uzbekistan, China, Canada, the Netherlands and Tunisia arrived in Syria.

"Syria Disarmament Mission to Involve Up to 100 Experts," [RIA-Novosti](#), 6 Oct 2013.

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**7 Oct 2013**

After meeting Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov at the economic summit in Bali Indonesia on 7 Oct, Kerry had lavish praise for Assad's *one week* of cooperation with OPCW.

And they [OPCW] have moved with equal speed to get on the ground in Syria and begin the operations. I think it is extremely significant that yesterday, Sunday [6 Oct], within a week of the resolution being passed, some chemical weapons were already being destroyed. I think it's also credit to the Assad regime for complying rapidly, as they are supposed to. Now, we hope that will continue. I'm not going to vouch today for what happens months down the road, but it's a good beginning, and we should welcome a good beginning.

"Joint Press Availability With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov After Their Meeting," [State Dept.](#), 7 Oct 2013.

At the end of his prepared remarks, Kerry talked about the proposed peace conference in Geneva:

Finally, Foreign Minister Lavrov and I discussed our mutual goal, which we are extraordinarily focused on, of ending the war in Syria through a political transition to a more broadly acceptable democratic government, under the terms of the Geneva communique. We agreed, again, that there is no military solution here. We share an interest in not having radical extremists on either side of any kind assuming a greater status or position in Syria. And that is why we recommitted today with very specific efforts to move the Geneva process as rapidly as possible. We are going to both engage with Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and lay the groundwork for a round of talks. It is our mutual hope that that can happen in November. And we are both intent and determined in consultation with our friends in these efforts to try to make certain that this can happen in November. A final date and the terms of participation will have to be determined by the United Nations, but we had a very constructive discussion about the path to getting there and we are both committed to leave here with a determination to begin that process, because we both believe — both countries believe, our leaders believe, President Putin and President Obama — that nothing is served by the prolongation of the violence in Syria. The humanitarian catastrophe is overwhelming the region, and we have a significant responsibility to try to address it.

*Ibid.*

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**8 Oct 2013**

OPCW press release:

The OPCW Technical Secretariat in The Hague will deploy a second team of inspectors for the mission in Syria that will augment the advance team of OPCW experts, who have been in Syria since 1 October conducting verification and destruction activities.

In his opening statement to the 74th session of the OPCW Executive council, Director-General Ahmet Uezuemcue reported on the progress of the OPCW mission in Syria,

inter alia:

- On 4 October the Syrian Arab Republic submitted additional information updating its initial disclosure, which drew in part on technical assistance provided by the OPCW team and will help the OPCW plan its future activities.
- On 6 October Syrian officials commenced destroying certain Category 3 chemical weapons and destroying or disabling a range of items, towards the goal of rendering unusable all production facilities and mixing and filling equipment by 1 November of this year.

[OPCW](#), 8 Oct 2013.

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The *Los Angeles Times* gives some facts about the composition of rebel forces in Syria: U.S. intelligence officials are increasingly concerned that Al Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups could carve out a haven in Syria that will offer the kind of sanctuary they once enjoyed in northwestern Pakistan, current and former U.S. officials say.

Officials say a clandestine CIA program that provides rudimentary training and weapons to U.S.-backed politically moderate insurgents is unlikely to curb the growing strength of extremists among the opposition militias seeking to overthrow Syrian President Bashar Assad.

.....

"There's a concern that some of the insurgents, especially foreigners affiliated with Nusra and the other extremist factions, could pose a terrorist threat either from Syria or upon returning to their home countries," said a second U.S. official who was not authorized to be identified discussing intelligence. "There's little doubt that many of them share Al Qaeda's global jihadist ambitions."

U.S. officials say 100 to 500 foreign fighters arrive in Syria each month to join the radical Islamist factions of the insurgency. They have come from all over the world, including the U.S., Canada, Australia, France, Britain and the Netherlands, as well as countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

U.S. officials say Syria has become the global focal point for militants who want to wage holy war, eclipsing Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen.

.....

All told, Al Qaeda and its ideological allies make up as much as 35% of the Syrian rebel movement, a U.S. intelligence official said. The opposition is believed to include about 100,000 fighters in all.

"U.S. fears radical Islamists could take root in Syria," [Los Angeles Times](#), 8 Oct 2013.

On 20 Sep 2013, Russia voiced similar concerns about terrorism spreading from Syria to

other countries, when rebel fighters return home from Syria. The anonymous U.S. government official's estimate of 35,000 jihadists and/or terrorists in Syria is frightening. I have this image of Syria like a dandelion weed, whose seeds blow away in a gust of wind.

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### 9 Oct 2013

The director of OPCW had a video press conference that was summarized by *Al-Arabiya*:  
The head of the world's chemical weapons watchdog called Wednesday [9 Oct] for a temporary ceasefire in Syria's civil war to ensure that disarmament deadlines are met.

"I think if some temporary ceasefires can be established, I think those targets could be reached," Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons chief Ahmet Uzumcu told journalists in The Hague, reported Agence France-Presse.

The OPCW has been given the challenge of dismantling Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and facilities by mid-2014.

[Al-Arabiya](#), 13:18 GMT, 9 Oct 2013.

*Al-Jazeera* reported:

"If we can ensure cooperation by all parties, and if some temporary ceasefires could be established in order to permit our experts to work in a permissive environment, I think the targets could be reached," Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) head Ahmet Uzumcu told journalists in The Hague on Wednesday [9 Oct].

....

Inspectors have already visited one chemical site in Syria and are visiting another on Wednesday, with some weapons already destroyed. "There are 20 sites to be visited in the coming weeks," Uzumcu said.

Speaking at the same press conference, Uzumcu's political advisor Malik Ellahi said "at the moment there are certain sites that are located in areas which are dangerous."

Ellahi added that most sites to be inspected at this stage were in Syrian government-controlled areas.

[Al-Jazeera](#), 9 Oct 2013.

See also [RIA-Novosti](#).

Incidentally, this news story was ignored by journalists in the USA. That is why I am, again, citing foreign websites. For the record, the top stories in the USA are a continuing shutdown of the dysfunctional U.S. government, defects and problems in the websites selling obamacare health insurance (more dysfunctional government), and the Nobel prizes were announced this week.

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### 10 Oct 2013

Reuters reported that the USA is trying to sell mobile destruction facilities to the OPCW for use in Syria:

The Pentagon is suggesting the world's chemical weapons watchdog use a U.S.-made mobile destruction unit in Syria to neutralise the country's toxic stockpile, officials told Reuters.

It gave a briefing on the unit on Tuesday to officials at the Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, who are deciding what technology to use for the ambitious chemical weapons destruction plan, two officials said.

....

A U.S. defence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the unit costs roughly \$5 million to build.

....

The U.S. unit, built by the ECBC [U.S. Army's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center] and the government's Defense Threat Reduction Agency, is operated by a crew of 15. It can destroy up to 25 metric tonnes of chemical agents per day when run around the clock, according to Edgewood. Several units could be located on the same site, enabling the sharing of security and other assets, it said.

"Exclusive — U.S. suggests destruction unit for Syria's chemical weapons," [Reuters](#), 18:31 BST, 10 Oct 2013.

U.S. Army [newsletter](#) about the mobile destruction facility, called a "Field Deployable Hydrolysis System (FDHS)".

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### 11 Oct 2013

The Associated Press reported on atrocities by rebels:

Jihadi-led rebel fighters in Syria killed at least 190 civilians and abducted more than 200 during an offensive against pro-regime villages, committing a war crime, an international human rights group said Friday [11 Oct].

The Aug. 4 attacks on unarmed civilians in more than a dozen villages in the coastal province of Latakia were systematic and could even amount to a crime against humanity, Human Rights Watch said in a 105-page report based ... on a visit a month later to the area, with permission from the Syrian regime.

The report quoted witnesses as saying rebels went house to house, killing entire families or killing the men and taking women and children hostage.

The villagers belong to the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam which forms the backbone of President Bashar Assad's regime — and which Sunni Muslim extremists consider heretics.

....

The findings are bound to feed mounting Western unease about the tactics of some of those trying to topple Assad and about the growing role of jihadi rebels, including foreign fighters linked to al-Qaida.

Karin Laub, "New report says Syrian rebels committed war crimes," [Associated Press](#), 09:04 EDT, 11 Oct 2013.

Human Rights Watch [Report](#) (16 pages), [HRW full Report](#) (105 pages).

See also [BBC](#), [CNN](#), [Al-Jazeera](#), [Arab News](#).

Later in the day, the Russian news network, RIA-Novosti, reported:

The report comes amid ongoing concern in the United States and abroad about the influence of Islamic extremists within the US-backed Syrian opposition. Syrian President Bashar Assad and his staunch ally, Russia, have argued that the opposition is teeming with Islamic extremists who could spread terrorism beyond Syria's borders.

The villages targeted in the attack are located near the coastal city of Latakia and inhabited mainly by Alawite Muslims, the minority sect of Shiite Islam to which Assad belongs, HRW said.

....

The administration of US President Barack Obama has been providing military and humanitarian aid to opposition groups seeking to oust Assad, whom Washington accuses of using chemical weapons in the two-year-old conflict.

The White House has repeatedly said that it is vetting the rebel groups it works with to ensure the United States is not arming terrorists, though it concedes that extremist Islamic elements have joined the opposition in fighting Assad's forces.

[RIA-Novosti](#), 11 Oct 2013.

We should be genuinely concerned with the tens of thousands of Islamic terrorists and jihadists in Syria, who someday may move to other nations and inflict atrocities there.

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On the morning of 11 Oct, it was announced that the OPCW organization had won this year's Nobel Peace Prize. The small OPCW press office is now swamped with inquiries from journalists for interviews. At night on 11 Oct, the most recent "Daily Bulletins from Syria" at the OPCW website is dated 6 Oct, so their press office was not maintaining the website before the Nobel Prize was announced. Now the OPCW press office will be even further behind.

On 16 Oct, the OPCW website posted the press release for 11 Oct:

The advance team from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the United Nations has made good progress in verifying the information submitted by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on its chemical weapons programme. At the end of the first ten days of operations on the ground the verification teams have



inspected three sites and plans are underway for further site visits.

A second group of OPCW inspectors and more UN support staff have arrived in Damascus, bringing to about 60 the number people on the advance team.

As OPCW has received initial and supplementary information from Syria on its chemical weapons programme, the advance team is now in the process of verifying that information. It has also overseen the destruction by Syria of some of its munitions stockpile as well as some of its chemical weapons production equipment.

[OPCW](#), 11 Oct 2013.

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### 12 Oct 2013

On the morning of 12 Oct, rebels fired two mortar shells that hit near the hotel where OPCW personnel were staying, killing an 8 y old girl. The Associated Press reported:

The blasts struck some 300 meters (1,000 feet) away from the Four Seasons Hotel where the chemical inspectors and U.N. staff are staying. A U.N. employee staying there said it did not appear that the hotel was affected by the twin explosions. The hotel remained open after the blasts, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters.

He said he heard the first explosion at about 11:15 a.m., followed by a second. Thick smoke rose from the area and ambulance sirens sounded shortly afterward.

Syrian rebels routinely fire mortar shells from the outskirts of Damascus at city neighborhoods controlled by forces loyal to President Bashar Assad. Last week [6 Oct], a similar attack reportedly killed eight people.

....

The OPCW inspectors have so far visited three sites linked to Syria's chemical weapons program, though the agency has not provided details. On Saturday, before the mortar attack [at 11:15], a convoy of U.N. cars left the Four Seasons, but its destination was not known.

Karin Laub, "Mortar shells hit near inspectors' hotel in Syria," [Associated Press](#), 10:06 EDT, 12 Oct 2013.

The Associated Press also reported that the leader of Al-Qaeda spoke on 11 Oct about Syria: In an audio message Friday [11 Oct], the leader of al-Qaida urged jihadis in Syria to unite, an appeal likely aimed at rival affiliates of his terror network operating in the country.

Ayman al-Zawahri said fighters must "rise above organizational loyalties and party partisanship" and unite behind the goal of setting up an Islamic state. He suggested he will not impose unity, saying that "what you agree upon will also be our choice."

Two al-Qaida-linked groups have emerged — Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. The first is commanded by a Syrian, the second by an Iraqi, but both are believed to be loyal to al-Zawahri.

Al-Zawahri also urged Syrian regime opponents not to cut deals with Westerns and secular groups.

*Ibid.*

See also [New York Times](#), 08:07 EDT, 12 Oct 2013.

Indiscriminately firing mortar shells into civilian areas — whether by Palestinians into Israel or rebels into Damascus — is a war crime, although no one wants to prosecute such minor incidents.

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On 12 Oct, *Al-Jazeera* published a thoughtful analysis of the civil war in Syria:

Inspired by the popular revolts in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, large numbers of Syrians reckoned in March 2011 that the time was ripe for ending the decades-long Alawite political domination and so joined a peaceful revolution that seemed at least morally bound to succeed.

However, today they find themselves by most measures in a far worse situation than before.

With the conflict's death toll according to UN estimates now exceeding 100,000 and 6.1 million Syrians forced to flee their homes, many of those who rooted for Assad's overthrow cannot be dismissed as fair-weather rebels merely for questioning now the wisdom of choosing the revolutionary road.

....

Indeed, the consensus view is that Assad has been able to retain not only the loyalty of his domestic political constituencies but also the backing of powerful international allies in both words and actions.

By contrast, the people projected as a viable alternative to the government in Damascus have clearly failed to parlay the sacrifices of the early revolutionaries into definitive military and political success.

The Istanbul-based coalition of opposition groups is widely regarded as an unruly talking shop for exiles representing the interests of major Arab and Western powers.

The armed groups on the ground, too, have increasingly turned to outdoing each other in Islamist rhetoric instead of revolutionary fervour and, of late, to picking fights with each other and with secular Kurdish militias.

Among the casualties of the war is the original idea of a liberal, democratic post-Baathist Syria that fired the imagination of the Damascus Spring intellectuals and much of the West.

"The situation in Syria does worry people in other Middle East countries in the sense that nobody wants democracy to come at the cost of stability," [Michael] Stephens [of the Royal United Services Institute Qatar in Doha] says.

"Many people I have met, in Saudi Arabia for example, have told me 'We don't want what is happening in Syria. We want stability'."

....

Indeed, many members of the international community are no longer confident that the Assad government's replacement will necessarily be an improvement.

While Russia, China and mainly Shia Iran were expected to back the current regime anyway for a mixture of ideological and strategic reasons, their commitment has doubtless been reinforced by the Sunni Islamist domination of the opposition.

Likewise, the disillusionment of Western publics with the objective of toppling Assad has much to do with the unsettling prospect of seeing an al-Qaeda-inspired government taking shape in the heart of the Middle East.

After the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries seen by the US and Britain as places where their "sacrifices in blood and treasure" have failed to alter violent political narratives, it is hardly astonishing that large majorities in both countries oppose military involvement in the Syrian conflict regardless of the moral and humanitarian imperatives.

On balance, from the standpoint of an educated, middle-class Syrian, almost anything that could go wrong with the revolution, has gone wrong. For a more religiously minded compatriot, that would probably be too gloomy an assessment.

Despite the clear advantages of Arab Spring momentum, access to social media and international sympathy, and the implication of government figures in war crimes, opposition activists had no answer to the regime's formidable war arsenal and regional support network, two factors that proved crucial to its durability.

While the moral and economic support of the West, Turkey and wealthy Gulf Arab countries for the opposition National Coalition was vital, both on the battlefield and at the UN, it was the Assad regime's backers who prevailed time and again.

Meanwhile, the slow implosion of the moderate fighting units and the attendant ascendancy of al-Qaeda-aligned groups helped bolster the Assad regime's argument that the uprising was nothing more than a war between secular Syrians and foreign fundamentalists.

As if all these factors were not insidious enough, Assad's opponents were handicapped by their inability to project a Mandela-like unifying figure who could stand above petty

factional rivalries and rally international public opinion to their side.

Arnab Neil Sengupta, "Analysis: Syrian uprising's cautionary tale," [Al-Jazeera](#), 12 Oct 2013.

Summarizing, the better-equipped military and better-organized military of Assad was responsible for Assad prevailing militarily. Further, the rebels were disadvantaged by their inability to find a "Mandela-like unifying figure" who could end the disorganization of the rebels and attract consistent international support. In short, Assad is a more effective leader than the rebels can find. Moreover, the appearance of jihadists and Al-Qaeda terrorists in Syria caused Western Civilization to withhold or limit support. The jihadists and terrorists sought an Islamic state in Syria, effectively poisoning the secular, pro-democracy revolution in Syria.

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### 13 Oct 2013

More bad news from Syria today. Reuters reports:

Gunmen abducted six Red Cross aid workers and a local volunteer of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in northwest Syria on Sunday [13 Oct], the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said.

....

The team had gone to Idlib on Thursday [10 Oct] to assess the medical situation in the province and to deliver medical supplies to Sarmin and Idlib city, it said. The convoy was clearly marked with the ICRC emblem when stopped near Sareqeb on the way back to Damascus, it added.

....

Kidnappings have become increasingly common in northern Syria, where rebels have captured swathes of territory but government forces have clung on to many urban centres and fighting continues daily.

"Gunmen abduct 6 Red Cross workers and local volunteer in Syria," [Reuters](#), 18:51 BST, 13 Oct 2013.

Also [Al-Arabiya](#) and [The Guardian](#)

*Al-Jazeera* reports the same facts and observes:

The road on which the members were travelling is notorious for kidnappings, Al Jazeera's Omar Al Saleh reported. "We understand from talking to activists in that area there are a number of armed groups."

....

Kidnapping has become an increasing problem in Syria, with journalists and aid workers frequently targeted in rebel-held parts of the country, largely located in the north.

Last month a German aid worker held for almost four months escaped his kidnappers

in Idlib, just like his two colleagues who managed to flee in July, according to their aid group Gruenhelme.

[Al-Jazeera](#), 13 Oct 2013.

The kidnapping of noncombatants — and especially kidnapping of humanitarian aid workers (e.g., Red Cross) — is a barbaric act. The firing of mortar shells into civilian areas by rebels on 12 Oct and the kidnapping of Red Cross personnel by rebels on 13 Oct further confirms my view of rebels as barbarians. There *may* be some "good" rebels in Syria, but *all* of the rebels are being tarnished by the acts of the terrorists and barbarians.

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### 14 Oct 2013

The director of OPCW explained to the BBC about the need for cease fires in Syria:  
The head of the body tasked with destroying Syria's chemical weapons says fighting is preventing access to some sites through rebel-held areas.

Ahmet Uzumcu, of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, called for local, short-term ceasefires to allow experts to work.

....

In his first interview since the OPCW won the Nobel Peace Prize last week, Mr Uzumcu told the BBC's Today programme that Syrian officials had been co-operating and facilitating the experts' work.

He said they had been taken wherever they wanted to go, and that they had already reached five out of at least 20 facilities capable of producing chemical weapons.

However, Mr Uzumcu said, routes to some of the sites went through opposition-held territory and this prevented access.

"They change hands from one day to another, which is why we appeal to all sides in Syria to support this mission, to be co-operative and not render this mission more difficult. It's already challenging," he said.

....

He added that one abandoned site was located in a rebel-held area, and that his team was hoping to access it.

"Syria chemical weapons: OPCW plea for short ceasefires," [BBC](#), 11:55 EDT, 14 Oct 2013. See also [The New York Times](#).

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On the morning of 14 Oct, three of the six kidnapped Red Cross personnel were released along with the one kidnapped Red Crescent worker. The Associated Press reported:  
Meanwhile, the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva confirmed Monday [14 Oct] that three of its employees and one from the Syrian Red Crescent

were released, a day after being kidnapped by gunmen in Idlib province. The fate of three other ICRC employees who were also kidnapped Sunday [13 Oct] was not immediately known.

The [Britain-based Syrian] Observatory [for Human Rights] and a local activist in Idlib said the aid workers had been seized by an al-Qaida-linked group, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, but there was no claim of responsibility.

Much of the Idlib countryside and other parts of northern and eastern Syria have fallen under the control of rebels, many of them Islamic extremists. Kidnappings have become common, particularly of aid workers and foreign journalists.

Bassem Mroue, "Car bomb in northern Syria kills at least 15," [Associated Press](#), 11:46 EDT, 14 Oct 2013.

See also [Al-Arabiya](#) and [Al-Jazeera](#), 14 Oct 2013.

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### 15 Oct 2013

On 15 Oct, the big stories were (1) the continuing shutdown of the U.S. government, (2) negotiations in Geneva to end Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, (3) the Taliban bombed a mosque in Afghanistan and killed a governor, and (4) Islamic pilgrims stoned the Devil during the annual Hajj. The *Los Angeles Times* recognized that the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria has the effect of perpetuating Assad's regime at least through mid-2014.

.... Assad is now an essential partner in a process that will last until at least mid-2014, and could drag on much longer.

In a few short weeks, the push to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons under international supervision has, in the view of many, in effect supplanted the goal of ousting Assad.

....

... analysts say the last thing U.S. policymakers want now is Assad's hasty exit — especially with badly divided rebel forces increasingly dominated by multinational militant factions, including some linked to Al Qaeda. A steady stream of reports linking Syrian insurgents to executions, kidnappings and sectarian rampages has sullied the rebels' image, alarmed U.S. policymakers and bolstered Assad's support in Syria among his key constituencies, minorities and the urban elite.

Patrick J. McDonnell, "Push to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons may extend Assad's rule," [Los Angeles Times](#), 15 Oct 2013.

This view is not really new. I mentioned it on 20 Sep of my previous essay, when I commented: "Note that Assad has gained credibility because nations must recognize Assad as the lawful ruler of Syria in order to dispose of Assad's chemical weapons." But today's article in the *Los Angeles Times* shows how the mainstream media is beginning to change popular opinion in the USA about Syria.

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**16 Oct 2013**

On 16 Oct, the Associated Press reported:

International inspectors have visited 11 sites linked to Syria's chemical weapons program and destroyed "critical equipment" at six, the agency overseeing the elimination of the country's stockpile said Wednesday [16 Oct].

The team also supervised the destruction of unloaded chemical weapons munitions, said the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

....

The team began operating in Syria at the beginning of October, and by last week, had visited two sites. Wednesday's update signaled a significant progress in the team's work.

Ryan Lucas, "WEAPONS INSPECTORS CHECK 11 SITES IN SYRIA," [Associated Press](#), 10:45 EDT, 16 Oct 2013.

The same Associated Press story also reported on the continuing disintegration of the Syrian National Coalition, the rebels supported by the West:

Meanwhile, there were growing signs of division among those trying to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

A rebel who claimed to speak for dozens of groups of fighters in southern Syria said they no longer recognize the authority of the country's main Western-backed political opposition alliance.

If confirmed, the announcement would serve as a new blow to the Syrian National Coalition and its claim to speak for those trying to bring down Assad. Southern Syria is considered a stronghold of the moderate, Western-funded opposition which appears to be losing ground to Islamic extremists.

In a video posted Wednesday [16 Oct], a bearded man in military fatigues stood in front of two dozen fighters, some holding up the emblem of the Free Syrian Army, the main Western-backed rebel alliance.

The man read out the names of more than 65 fighting groups, saying they feel abandoned by the political leadership and "withdraw their recognition" of the Coalition.

*Ibid.*

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I note that three employees of the International Red Cross have been missing since they were kidnapped by rebels in Syria on 13 Oct. There is no mention of them by journalists, since repeated requests for their release only increases their ransom value. Kidnapping humanitarian aid workers further tarnishes an already badly tarnished Muslim religion, whose followers put bombs in shopping centers, mosques, and funerals.

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**17 Oct 2013**

On the morning of 17 Oct, Reuters reports that Turkey is becoming concerned about Al-Qaeda terrorists in Syria:

The rise of al Qaeda in parts of Syria's north has left Turkey facing a new security threat on its already vulnerable border and raised questions about its wholesale support for rebels battling President Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey has long championed more robust backing for Syria's fractious armed opposition, arguing it would bring a quicker end to Assad's rule and give moderate forces the authority they needed to keep more radical Islamist elements in check.

But with Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) taking territory in parts of the north near the border in recent weeks, it is a strategy that increasingly looks to have been a miscalculation.

....

[Louay Meqdad, a spokesman for the rebel Free Syrian Army, said:] Foreign mercenaries, mainly backed by Gulf states, were initially welcomed by Syria's rebel forces because they had greater battle experience and were more effective against pro-Assad militias, he said.

"This was a tactical mistake and now we see a totally different balance of power."

....

... [Assad] warned Turkey it would pay for harbouring "terrorists" who, he said, would turn on their hosts.

It is not a risk Turkey can comfortably dismiss. Like Jordan, which fears Islamist fighters radicalised in Syria could return and strike targets inside the pro-Western kingdom, Turkey is not immune to the threat from al Qaeda.

"Al Qaeda's rise in northern Syria leaves Turkey in a dilemma," [Reuters](#), 17 Oct 2013.

Al-Qaeda has been in Syria for at least 22 months (since Jan 2012), but, astoundingly, Syria's neighbors are only now beginning to realize the presence of Al-Qaeda is a game changer. I agree with Russia that support for Assad is the best strategy against Islamic terrorists and jihadists. However — and this is the scary part — neither the Russians (in Afghanistan during 1980s) nor the USA (in Iraq and Afghanistan) were able to defeat Islamic terrorists. It is unclear how Assad will defeat Islamic terrorism, but he may be able to keep terrorists engaged inside Syria.

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On 17 Nov, National Public Radio reported an interview with Kerry:

Asked by Morning Edition host Renee Montagne whether the agreement ensures that Syria's President Bashar Assad will remain in power, perhaps for many more months, Kerry replied:



"The fact is that these weapons can be removed whether Assad is there or not there because we know the locations, the locations have been declared, the locations are being secured. And my hope is that much of this material will be moved as rapidly [as] possibly into one location, and hopefully on a ship, and removed from the region."

Where such a ship would go is unclear, NPR's Michele Kelemen reports, and even the logistics of dealing with the weapons inside Syria are complicated.

Dana Farrington, "Kerry Says He Hopes Syria's Chemical Weapons Are Shipped Out Of Region," [NPR](#), 05:01 EDT, 17 Oct 2013.

Also see, "KERRY WANTS CHEMICAL ARMS SHIPPED OUT OF SYRIA," [Associated Press](#), 13:47 EDT, 17 Oct 2013.

Quickly shipping *all* of the chemical weapons out of Syria has at least three advantages: (1) prevents Assad from renegeing on agreements; (2) after cooperation from Assad is no longer necessary, the West is then free to call for Assad's resignation; and (3) neutralization of chemicals outside a war zone is easier: no need for cease fire agreements with unreliable rebels.

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### 18 Oct 2013

In my previous essay on Syria, I mentioned the refusal of Saudi Arabia to address the United Nations General Assembly on 2 Oct 2013. On 17 Oct, Saudi Arabia was elected for a two-year terms as one of the ten nonpermanent members of the United Nations Security Council. This morning (18 Oct), Saudi Arabia declined to accept the seat on the Security Council. While all of the major news organizations (e.g., Associated Press, Reuters, Agence-France Presse, etc.) covered this story, I searched for the definitive explanation from the Saudi Foreign Ministry:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a statement after the election of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for two years. Following is the text of the statement:

....

... the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia believes that the manner, the mechanisms of action and double standards existing in the Security Council prevent it from performing its duties and assuming its responsibilities towards preserving international peace and security as required, leading to the continued disruption of peace and security, the expansion of the injustices against the peoples, the violation of rights[,] and the spread of conflicts and wars around the world.

....

With the current continuation of the Palestinian cause without a just and lasting solution for 65 years, which resulted in several wars[, and] threatened international peace and security[,] is irrefutable evidence and proof of the Security Council's inability to carry out its duties and assume its responsibilities.

The failure of the Security Council to make the Middle East a free [sic] zone of all weapons of mass destruction, whether because of its inability to subdue the nuclear programs of all countries in the region, without exception, to the international control and inspection or to prevent any country in the region from possessing nuclear weapons, is another irrefutable evidence and proof of its inability to carry out its duties and hold its responsibilities.

Allowing the ruling regime in Syria to kill and burn its people by the chemical weapons, while the world stands idly, without applying deterrent sanctions against Damascus regime, is also irrefutable evidence and proof of the inability of the Security Council to carry out its duties and responsibilities.

Accordingly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, based on its historical responsibilities towards its people, Arab and Islamic nations as well as towards the peoples aspiring for peace and stability all over the world, announces its apology for not accepting membership of the Security Council until the Council is reformed and enabled, effectively and practically, to carry out its duties and responsibilities in maintaining international peace and security.

"Foreign Ministry Makes Statement on Saudi Arabia's Apology for Not Accepting Security Council Membership," [Saudi Press Agency](#), 10:12 GMT, 18 Oct 2013. (The Saudi Press Agency does *not* allow links directly to their news stories.)

*The New York Times* commented: "Saudi Arabia stunned the United Nations and even some of its own diplomats on Friday by taking the unprecedented step of rejecting a highly coveted seat on the Security Council it had won for the first time just a day earlier." [NY Times](#). *The Washington Post* published an Associated Press story that began: "Saudi Arabia on Friday rejected its seat on the U.N. Security Council hours after it was elected to it, in a rare and startling move aimed at protesting the body's failure to resolve the Syrian civil war." [Washington Post](#). See also [Associated Press](#), 12:21 EDT, 18 Oct 2013. Similarly, Reuters said: "Saudi Arabia turned down a coveted seat on the United Nations Security Council on Friday [18 Oct] in a rare display of anger at the failure of the international community to end the war in Syria and act on other Middle East issues." [Reuters](#), 18:50 BST, 18 Oct 2013.

However, Russia — which opposes Saudi Arabia's support of rebels in Syria — said it was "puzzled" by the Saudi rejection. [rt.com](#). The Russian Foreign Ministry criticized the "strange reasoning" of the Saudis. [RIA-Novosti](#). The Russian position seems to focus on the cooperation since 9 Sep 2013 about removing chemical weapons from Syria, and *ignore* the more than 115,000 dead Syrians since March 2011 in a continuing civil war that no one knows how to end.

### my comments

My comment is basically agreement with the Saudi government that the United Nations Security Council has *not* been effective in preventing or ending wars. Although not amongst

the examples of UN failure cited by the Saudi government, the first major United Nations action, which opposed communist aggression in Korea, ended in a stalemate in 1953, which continues to this day. Moreover, the North Koreans continue to produce and test both nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in violation of numerous UN Security Council resolutions.

The Saudi Government mentions three examples of how the United Nations Security Council has failed: (1) Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (2) weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, and (3) chemical weapons in Syria.

I see the Israeli-Palestinian issue from a different perspective than the Arabs. Palestinian terrorists have a more than forty-year history of terrorism against Israel, which continues today with rockets and mortar shells from Gaza. History shows wars against Israel not only by the Palestinians, but also by Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Therefore, I disagree with the Saudis when they say "The failure of the Security Council to make the Middle East a ... zone [free] of all weapons of mass destruction," because Israel *needs* weapons of mass destruction to deter future aggression by numerically superior Arab neighbors who surround Israel. If Arabs would stop attacking Israel, then the Arabs would have nothing to fear from weapons of mass destruction in Israel.

The United Nations has not yet investigated and concluded who used chemical weapons in Syria on 21 Aug. *After* trustworthy facts have been obtained, then we can have a criminal prosecution of whoever was responsible for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Given that chemical weapons are responsible for fewer than 2% of the deaths in the Syrian civil war, I would complain about the lack of an arms embargo that stops munitions entering Syria. In this context, Russian and Iran deserve blame for arming the Assad government, and Saudi Arabia (amongst others) deserves blame for arming rebels.

While the Saudi government is correct that the United Nations Security Council has failed to prevent or end wars, the Saudi government does *not* propose any constructive changes to the United Nations to make it more effective. It is easy to criticize, but much more difficult to propose constructive changes that would make the Security Council more effective. In particular, it is easy to criticize the veto wielded by each of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, but exercise of that veto by the USA has prevented the Council from condemning Israel.

One of the big problems in the modern world is the spread of Islamic terrorism, which also complicates the civil war in Syria. As I said in my previous [essay](#) on Syria:

It is a fact that Osama bin Laden came from Saudi Arabia, as did 15 of the 19 hijackers on 11 Sep 2001. In my opinion, Saudi Arabia (and also other Muslim nations) need to abolish Islamic terrorism, including strong condemnation of terrorism by respected Islamic religious leaders. Muslim political leaders — and especially Muslim clerics — are better positioned to persuade Muslim militants to abandon terrorism than either Christian or Jewish leaders.

As custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina, the Saudi Arabia government has a special responsibility to end Islamic terrorism.

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### 18 Oct 2013, continued

The International Red Cross issued an appeal on 18 Oct for the release of three remaining Red Cross personnel who were kidnapped on 13 Oct by Islamic terrorists. [Al-Arabiya](#), 19:40 GMT, 18 Oct 2013.

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Above on 11 Oct, I remarked that the OPCW is at least 5 days behind in posting daily news bulletins about Syria at its website. Today, 18 Oct, the OPCW changed its website to omit the word *daily* from the section formerly called "Daily Bulletins from Syria". The most recent ~~daily~~ bulletin at the OPCW website is dated 11 Oct.

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### 19 Oct 2013

Governments of Arab nations appealed to Saudi Arabia to take its seat on the United Nations Security Council. *Al-Jazeera* reported:

Saudi Arabia's leaders should "maintain their membership in the Security Council and continue their brave role in defending our issues specifically at the rostrum of the Security Council," said a statement released by Arab states at the UN.

It added however that it was crucial for Saudi Arabia to represent the Arab and Muslim world on the council "at this important and historical stage, specifically for the Middle East region."

Many diplomats and analysts have said the Saudi protest was a message to the United States that it wanted a tougher stance on Syria and was angry that Washington had opened contacts with Iran.

The kingdom has been angered by the increasing rapport between Washington and Iran, Saudi Arabia's old regional foe, which has taken root since President Barack Obama spoke by telephone with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

The conservative Islamic kingdom [Saudi Arabia] has traditionally avoided big political statements, preferring to wield its influence as world's top oil exporter, birthplace of Islam and chief Arab ally of the US behind closed doors.

"Arab nations urge Saudi Arabia to take seat," [Al-Jazeera](#), 19 Oct 2013.  
See also [Reuters](#), 10:18 BST, 19 Oct 2013.

Agence France-Presse added:

But senior UN envoys say the decision was almost certainly taken personally by King Abdullah or Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal.

They said it would be very difficult to persuade the 89-year-old monarch to go back on the rejection.

[Agence France-Presse](#), 19 Oct 2013.

This mention of the King and Prince was omitted by Arab newspapers.

The government of Qatar agreed with the Saudi decision not to participate in the UN Security Council. [Kuwait News Agency](#), 19 Oct 2013 and [Gulf Times](#), 20 Oct 2013.

Note that the Saudi statement on 18 Oct was a press release, *not* a letter to the UN Secretary General, which suggests that the Saudi decision may not be final. Also, the Saudis were elected to a seat that becomes available on 1 Jan 2014, which gives two months for negotiations.

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## History During 20 Oct - 2 Nov 2013

### 20 Oct 2013

I am not interested in chronicling every atrocity that occurs in Syria. There are many of them and my unpaid time for this essay is limited. Moreover, the Syrian [Observatory](#) for Human Rights already chronicles atrocities and other significant events in Syria. But it is worth mentioning an attack yesterday (19 Oct) and today (20 Oct) by Islamic terrorists, in which mostly civilians were killed.

Yesterday, a suicide bomber from the jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra detonated at a Syrian army checkpoint near Damascus, killing about thirty people.

Today, a suicide bomber drove a truck full of explosives to a Syrian government checkpoint near Hama in Syria, and detonated the explosives. The resulting blast ignited a nearby petroleum or propane tank truck, which added to the intensity of the blasts. At least thirty people were killed in this one attack. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed at least 43 dead, including 32 civilians. *The New York Times* reports the al-Nusra group, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda, was responsible for today's bombing.

[The Guardian](#), 19 Oct 2013; [BBC](#), 20 Oct 2013; [Al-Jazeera](#), 20 Oct 2013; [The New York Times](#), 20 Oct 2013.

*The New York Times* put these two attacks into perspective:

[Today's] bombing followed a similar attack that killed 16 soldiers east of Damascus the day before, suggesting an increasing reliance on suicide attacks to try to break government strongholds that the rebels are unable to take by conventional means.

But the high civilian toll on Sunday worried antigovernment activists, who said it could lead to tensions between rebels and their extremist allies.

"Bomber Tied to Al Qaeda Kills Dozens in Syrian City," [The New York Times](#), 20 Oct 2013.

As I said previously, attacks on innocent civilians is *not* legitimate warfare, but is barbaric

terrorism. This is what happens when jihadists and Islamic terrorists become active.

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### 21 Oct 2013

*The New York Times* reports that the U.S. State Department is beginning to recognize that Al-Qaeda in Syria is a problem:

Even as planning intensifies for a Geneva peace conference on the war in Syria, the emergence of a group affiliated with Al Qaeda has undermined the chances of negotiating an end to the conflict, a senior State Department official said on Monday [21 Oct].

By challenging moderate Syrian rebels, the group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, has forced them to fight on two fronts and divert resources from their battle with the government of President Bashar al-Assad, the official said.

And by presenting an extremist face to the world, the official said, the group is aiding Mr. Assad's efforts to portray the conflict in Syria as a tug of war between the government and jihadists.

"That has to give the regime comfort and confidence, and it will make the task of extracting concessions from the regime at the negotiating table more difficult," said the official, who declined to be identified in keeping with the State Department's protocol for briefing reporters on active diplomacy.

....

But the senior State Department official said fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known by its initials, ISIS, had hampered the flow of American and other foreign assistance to the moderate resistance inside Syria, diluting the effort to increase the leverage on the Syrian leader.

"It has been very disruptive to our cross-border efforts — very disruptive," he said. "Qaeda-Linked Group Is Seen Complicating the Drive for Peace in Syria," [New York Times](#), 21 Oct 2013.

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### 22 Oct 2013

The London 11 conference was held today, as reported [below](#).

The Associated Press reported on 22 Oct:

Norway says it is weighing whether to take the bulk of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile for eventual destruction.

....

[Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Ragnhild] Imerslund told The Associated Press on Tuesday [22 Oct] that Norway is refusing to handle weapons-ready material though the country's newly installed center-right government is considering taking mustard gas and precursor chemicals that could be mixed to make more weapons.

The ministry says that, according to the latest UN estimates, Syria has 50 metric tons of mustard gas and some 300-500 metric tons of chemicals used to make deadly nerve agents.

[Associated Press](#), 13:51 EDT, 22 Oct 2013.

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The Saudi government now has its knickers in a twist. Reuters reports:

Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief has said the kingdom will make a "major shift" in relations with the United States in protest at its perceived inaction over the Syria war and its overtures to Iran, a source close to Saudi policy said on Tuesday.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan told European diplomats that Washington had failed to act effectively on the Syrian crisis and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was growing closer to Tehran, and had failed to back Saudi support for Bahrain when it crushed an anti-government revolt in 2011, the source said.

.....

Saudi anger boiled over after Washington refrained from military strikes in response to a poison gas attack in Damascus in August when Assad agreed to give up his chemical arsenal.

Saudi Arabia is also concerned about signs of a tentative reconciliation between Washington and Tehran, something Riyadh fears may lead to a "grand bargain" on the Iranian nuclear programme that would leave it at a disadvantage.

However, Kerry said he had tried to reassure his Saudi counterpart on U.S. Iran policy. "I reaffirmed President Obama's commitment that he will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon," said Kerry.

"Saudi spy chief says Riyadh to 'shift away from U.S.' over Syria, Iran," [Reuters](#), 18:20 BST, 22 Oct 2013.

I recall that we were told that in 2008, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia "repeatedly exhorted the United States to 'cut off the head of the snake'," by attacking the uranium enrichment facilities in Iran. [Reuters](#), 09:18 EST, 29 Nov 2010. My reaction is why doesn't the King use *his* money, and the lives of *his* people, to achieve his goals, instead of begging the USA to do it for him? Why should taxpayers in the USA pay, and U.S. military personnel die, to achieve the King's goal? Personally, I'd love to see Iran's nuclear facilities disappear, but it is likely that Iran would retaliate for that strike. The King is *not* motivated to protect Israel from Iran. Instead, the King (a Sunni muslim) is opposed to Iran's (a Shiite muslim nation) influence.

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*The New York Times* published an insightful article about Obama's history of decisions about the Syrian civil war. Part of the article says:

But as Mr. Kerry held meetings in London with representatives of Syrian opposition groups on Tuesday [22 Oct] in the hopes of reviving a proposed peace conference, the prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough appeared dim. Mr. Assad's position is stronger, and the rebellion has grown weaker, more fragmented and more dominated by Islamic radical factions.

A close examination of how the Obama administration finds itself at this point — based on interviews with dozens of current and former members of the administration, foreign diplomats and Congressional officials — starts with a deeply ambivalent president who has presided over a far more contentious debate among his advisers than previously known. Those advisers reflected Mr. Obama's own conflicting impulses on how to respond to the forces unleashed by the Arab Spring: whether to side with those battling authoritarian governments or to avoid the risk of becoming enmeshed in another messy war in the Middle East.

Mark Mazzetti, Robert F. Worth, and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed," [NY Times](#), 22 Oct 2013.

One correction to this article. Kerry did *not* hold a meeting in London with "Syrian opposition groups". The meeting included representatives of eleven meddling anti-Assad nations, and *one* rebel group, the Syrian National Coalition.

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### 23-24 Oct 2013

The OPCW held a press conference on 23 Oct. Here are the opening remarks by Michael Luhan:

**1. Site visits:**

- 18 of 23 disclosed sites visited as of yesterday [22 Oct]
- "Functional destruction" activities of critical equipment for CWPFs and M/F units have been undertaken at almost all of these 18 sites

**2. Current OPCW staff level:**

- 27 in Syria plus 1 in Lebanon for movement
- Joint OPCW/UN operations planning team deployed to Cyprus to work on logistics
- First OPCW staff rotation to occur next week, reducing force level to 15 inspectors
- Inspectors currently working in 3 teams, with "good access" to sites thus far

**3. Initial declaration and general plan for destruction:**

Under the Executive Council decision of 27 September, Syria's must submit its initial declaration and general plan of destruction to the OPCW by 27 Oct.



OPCW experts are working with the Syrian authorities to prepare the initial declaration, which will include the general plan of destruction. We expect to receive Syria's initial declaration within the next 24 hours, in accordance with the deadline of the EC decision.

**4. Support:**

OPCW will implement the current stage of verification and destruction activities with its own inspectors.

States Parties are providing OPCW lists of former inspectors who are available and willing to deploy for the Syria mission going forward.

**5. Cooperation:**

Interaction with UN remains excellent and cooperation from Syrian authorities complete.

[OPCW](#), 23 Oct 2013. (OPCW does not permit a link directly to this one transcript.)

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**25 Oct 2013**

On [22 Oct](#), Norway was considering destroying some of Syria's chemicals. Today, 25 Oct, Norway rejected that proposal, because it was not able to meet the United Nations' deadlines. The USA is now considering "other alternatives". [Norway Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), [Al-Arabiya](#), and [NY Times](#).

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Back on 2 Oct, the United Nations Security Council issued a nonbinding Presidential Statement calling for Syria (including the rebels/terrorists) to allow the UN to deliver food and other humanitarian aid to people in Syria. [UN Statement](#). Predictably, everyone in Syria ignored this Statement.

On 25 Oct, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, complained to the Security Council that the Statement was being ignored. [UN Briefing](#), 25 Oct 2013; [UN News Story](#), 25 Oct 2013; [Al-Jazeera](#), 26 Oct 2013.

This incident, among many others, show that neither Assad nor any of the rebel groups are concerned with the suffering of the *people* in Syria. Both the leaders of the Syrian government and the many leaders of the rebel groups are focused solely on political power and control.

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**26-27 Oct 2013**

I note that three employees of the International Red Cross have been missing since they were kidnapped by rebels in Syria on 13 Oct, two weeks ago. (See 13-14 Oct and 18 Oct, above) There is no mention of them by journalists, since repeated requests for their release only

increases their ransom value.

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On 27 Oct, Reuters reports:

Syria has submitted a declaration of its chemical weapons programme and a plan to eliminate them to the world's chemical weapons watchdog, the organisation said on Sunday [27 Oct], meeting the first major deadline of the destruction plan.

....

On Thursday [24 Oct], "the Syrian Arab Republic submitted to the OPCW its formal initial declaration covering its chemical weapons programme" which "includes a general plan of destruction for consideration by the OPCW Executive Council", the watchdog said in a statement on Sunday [27 Oct].

[Reuters](#), 15:39 GMT, 27 Oct 2013.

On 27 Oct, I wrote: the OPCW website's news about Syria has not been updated since 23 Oct, so one is forced to rely on secondary sources. But on 28 Oct OPCW posted its press release:

On 24 October 2013, the Syrian Arab Republic submitted to the OPCW its formal initial declaration covering its chemical weapons programme. Syria's submission is in line with the deadline set by the OPCW Executive Council in its decision of 27 September 2013 requiring a complete initial declaration by 27 October 2014. Such declarations provide the basis on which plans are devised for a systematic, total and verified destruction of declared chemical weapons and production facilities.

The document from Syria includes a general plan of destruction for consideration by the OPCW Executive Council.

Under the terms of the Chemical Weapons Convention, new States Parties are also required to submit a declaration covering activities and facilities that are not prohibited under the Convention but can be subjected to routine verification measures as a confidence building measure and to establish the peaceful intent of commercial activities. Syria has also submitted such a declaration.

The first monthly report on the work of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria has been issued to States Parties by the Director-General and forwarded for submission to the Security Council through the UN Secretary-General. It covers the progress made since inspections began in Syria following the deployment of the advance team on 1 October. This work included the priority task of making inoperable chemical weapons production facilities, and mixing and filling plants.

"Syria Submits its Initial Declaration and a General Plan of Destruction of its Chemical Weapons Programme," [OPCW](#), 27 Oct 2013.

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**28 Oct 2013**

Back on 9 Oct 2013, OPCW called for limited cease fires to allow OPCW teams to reach

some chemical weapons sites. The call was ignored by rebels. Consequently, OPCW is now unable to reach two sites. France24 reports from various news wire services:

The security situation in war-torn Syria has prevented international inspectors from visiting two remaining chemical weapons sites, the global watchdog said Monday [28 Oct].

Inspectors had by Sunday visited 21 of 23 chemical sites, but "the two remaining sites have not been visited due to security reasons," The Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said in a statement.

"Two Syrian chemical sites inaccessible due to unrest," [France24](#), 28 Oct 2013.

Note that this means the OPCW has missed its deadline to visit *all* 23 sites within 30 days of 27 Sep. The official OPCW statement said:

As of 27 October 2013, inspectors of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria completed verification activities at 21 of the 23 chemical weapons related sites declared by Syria.

The two remaining sites have not been visited due to security reasons. Efforts by the Joint Mission to ensure the conditions necessary for safe access to those sites will continue.

Syria submitted a formal declaration of its chemical weapons programme three days ahead of the 27 October deadline, together with a general plan of destruction, for consideration by the OPCW Executive Council.

The OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria was established to achieve the timely elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme in the safest and most secure manner possible.

[OPCW](#), 28 Oct 2013.

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### 29 Oct 2013

On 29 Oct 2013, the World Health Organization announced that it had confirmed ten cases of polio in Syria. I have posted a separate [essay](#) to discuss polio in Syria, and also in the three other nations (i.e., Nigeria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) where polio is endemic.

In an interesting development, the top Saudi Islamic leader urged young men *not* to fight in Syria:

Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, the highest religious authority in the birthplace of Islam, has urged young Saudis to refrain from fighting in Syria.

The kingdom has backed the rebels battling President Bashar al-Assad, publicly calling on the world powers to "enable" Syrians to protect themselves, but is wary that fighters could return home ready to wage war on their own dynastic rulers.

Islamists in Saudi Arabia, who follow a puritanical version of Sunni Islam, denounce

Assad and his administration as infidels because of their roots in the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam.

....

"This is all wrong, it's not obligatory," Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh said, in reference to Saudi men joining a civil war that is now in well into its third year, according to pan-Arab daily al-Hayat.

"These are feuding factions and one should not go there. I do not advise one to go there ... Going to a land that you do not know and without experience, you will be a burden to them, what they want from you is your prayer."

Mahmoud Habboush, "Saudi religious leader urges youths not to fight in Syria" [Reuters](#), 21:14 GMT, 28 Oct 2013.

"Saudi religious leader urges youths not to fight in Syria," [Al-Arabiya](#), 09:11 GMT, 29 Oct 2013.

Also see [Al-Jazeera](#).

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The deputy prime minister of Syria was sacked on 29 Oct:

Syria's deputy prime minister, Qadri Jamil, was dismissed on Tuesday [29 Oct] for leaving the country and acting without government permission after meeting U.S. officials in Switzerland, state media said.

The sacked minister is a member of what President Bashar al-Assad calls the "patriotic opposition" — political parties that consider themselves rivals to the president but have not joined the 2-1/2-year revolt against his rule.

"Jamil was dismissed because he left his centre of work without prior permission and did not follow up on his duties ... Additionally, he undertook activities outside the nation without coordinating with the government," said a statement posted on Syria TV.

U.S. and Middle East officials told Reuters that Jamil met the former American ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, on Saturday [26 Oct] in Geneva.

The two discussed the proposed "Geneva 2" talks that aim to launch negotiations between Assad's government and the rebel movement seeking his removal.

"He saw Ford after meeting Russian officials in Moscow. The meeting was long but useless," the Middle East official said, asking not to be named.

"Jamil put forward what Ford apparently regarded as unworkable proposals regarding the Geneva talks. He also unsuccessfully tried to win U.S. backing to including him on the opposition side in the Geneva talks," he said.

"Syrian deputy PM dismissed after U.S. talks," [Reuters](#), 16:27 GMT, 29 Oct 2013.

See also: [Al-Arabiya](#), [Al-Jazeera](#), [france24.com](#), 29 Oct; and [Russia Today](#), 30 Oct.

Agence France-Presse added that Jamil was *not* a member of Assad's Baath political party, instead Jamil was a former member of the Syrian communist party. Further, this was not just one unauthorized trip abroad:

A Lebanese newspaper reported that Jamil and his family have been living for the past several weeks in Moscow, where the former member of the Syrian communist party had studied economics.

[Global Post](#), 29 Oct 2013.

*The Telegraph* in London suggests that the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Jamil is more than just a response to Jamil's unauthorized absence from Syria:

Mr Jamil, a communist, was a self-described member of the opposition until he was brought into the government last year as Mr Assad tried to show he was responding to protests by broadening his regime.

He was regarded as the minister closest to Russia — and his sacking may be a signal to the Kremlin. Although Russia is an important ally, there have been suggestions that Moscow is hoping to replace Mr Assad with a pliant leader whom it can present as a "compromise" choice to the rest of the world.

Mr Jamil is a member of the minority Alawite sect to which the Assad family also belongs, and which controls the security apparatus. Even if Mr Assad were to be killed or forced out, both the US and Russia want to keep the pillars of the regime in place, at least temporarily, in order to prevent Syria from collapsing into even greater chaos.

That might have been the real cause of Mr Jamil's downfall, according to Joshua Landis, a leading analyst. "This underlines how the regime is — and how important loyalty to the regime is," he said.

Richard Spencer, "Bashar al-Assad sacks Syria's deputy prime minister", [The Telegraph](#), 19:12 GMT, 29 Oct 2013.

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### 30 Oct 2013

Jamil, who was news on 29 Oct, is forgotten on 30 Oct.

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The TASS news agency in Russia made a strange and terse report of chemical weapons use in Syria:

Russia is deeply concerned over the reports on the use of chemical weapons by the extremists in north-eastern Syria, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated on Wednesday [30 Oct].

"This information certainly should be checked thoroughly and should be investigated. Meanwhile, we recall again that U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118 approved unanimously shoulders special responsibility on neighbouring countries to Syria in order to prevent the chemical weapons from falling in the hands of non-state elements," the Russian Foreign Ministry stated.

"Russia deeply concerned over new reports on use of chemical weapons by extremists in

Syria," [TASS](#), 30 Oct 2013.

Notice that the location and time of the alleged use of chemical weapons is conspicuously missing, so the allegation can not be checked. On 5 Nov 2013, I checked Google News for the query

Syria use chemical weapons,

and looked at the titles of the top fifty hits. I found *only* the following allegations in a lengthy article at another Russian news source:

Rebuffed by Kurdish self-defense forces defending their homes, the Jihadists reportedly used chemical weapons against them in the city of Ras al-Ayn near the Turkish border on October 29.

Russia has expressed its indignation over the lack of coverage that western media has given to the report on Syrian rebels using chemical weapons against the local Kurdish community.

"Russia alarmed by fresh reports Syrian militants using chemical weapons — FM," [Voice of Russia](#), 30 Oct 2013.

I am mentioning this allegation, despite my skepticism about its credibility. If the allegation were true, I would expect the Kurds to complain publicly.

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### 31 Oct 2013

*All* of the Syrian chemical weapons production plants have been destroyed, in advance of a 1 Nov OPCW deadline. The OPCW news article says:

The Joint Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons - United Nations Mission confirmed today that the government of the Syrian Arab Republic has completed the functional destruction of critical equipment for all of its declared chemical weapons production facilities and mixing/filling plants, rendering them inoperable.

By doing so, Syria has met the deadline set by the OPCW Executive Council [on 27 Sep] to "complete as soon as possible and in any case not later than 1 November 2013, the destruction of chemical weapons production and mixing/filling equipment."

At the same time, OPCW Director-General Ahmet Uezuemcue welcomed back to the OPCW headquarters in The Hague a returning group of eight inspectors, who arrived in Damascus with the Advanced Team on 1 October and have been conducting the verification work on the ground ever since.

"On behalf of the OPCW, I thank you and all of our colleagues from the Joint OPCW-UN Mission who remain in Syria for your outstanding service," the Director-General said. "I salute the fortitude and courage you've all demonstrated in fulfilling the most challenging mission ever undertaken by this Organisation."

The Joint OPCW-UN Mission has inspected 21 of the 23 sites declared by Syria, and

39 of the 41 facilities located at those sites. The two remaining sites were not visited due to safety and security concerns. But Syria declared those sites as abandoned and that the chemical weapons programme items they contained were moved to other declared sites, which were inspected.

The Joint Mission is now satisfied that it has verified — and seen destroyed — all of Syria's declared critical production and mixing/filling equipment. Given the progress made in the Joint OPCW-UN Mission in meeting the requirements of the first phase of activities, no further inspection activities are currently planned. The next milestone for the mission will be 15 November, by which time the Executive Council must approve a detailed plan of destruction submitted by Syria to eliminate its chemical weapons stockpile.

[OPCW](#), 31 Oct 2013.

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*Al-Jazeera* published an Associated Press report:

Saudi Arabia has initiated a draft UN resolution to strongly condemn "widespread and systematic gross violations of human rights" by the Syrian government and "any" abuses by anti-government armed groups.

Saudi Arabia, which backs rebels fighting to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, has strongly criticised the Security Council's failure to resolve Syria's civil war and other conflicts, citing this as one reason for rejecting a seat on the UN's most powerful body earlier this month.

UN diplomats said the draft resolution, obtained on Wednesday [30 Oct] by the Associated Press news agency, is expected to be submitted to the human rights committee of the less powerful but much larger General Assembly by Friday's deadline [1 Nov].

The committee is expected to discuss it next week and vote on it in late November.

If approved, it is virtually certain to be adopted by the 193-member General Assembly in December.

....

It blames Syrian authorities for a wide range of human rights abuses including the indiscriminate use of ballistic missiles and cluster munitions; the killing and persecution of protesters, human rights defenders and journalists; attacks on schools and hospitals; and torture, sexual violence and rape in detention.

The draft strongly condemns the use of chemical weapons in Syria and "strongly points" to their use by the Syrian government in an August 21 poison gas attack that killed hundreds of civilians in the Damascus suburb of Al-Ghouta.

The draft also expresses "grave concern at the spread of extremism and extremist groups".

It strongly condemns all foreign fighters in Syria, singling out those fighting for the government, especially Hezbollah fighters from neighbouring Lebanon.

Diplomats said the resolution's strong demand for accountability and an end to impunity could be a problem for some countries when it comes to a vote, because of the precedent it could set.

"S Arabia pushes UN resolution on Syria abuse," [Al-Jazeera](#), 30 Oct 2013.

See also [Washington Post](#), 30 Oct 2013.

*Al-Arabiya* says Saudi Arabia today issued a draft resolution for a committee of the United Nations General Assembly to demand that the Security Council do its job of bringing Syrians before the International Criminal Court on charges of war crimes.

A Saudi draft resolution to the U.N. General Assembly's Third Committee calls on the Security Council to "uphold its responsibilities" in bringing those responsible for war crimes in Syria under international criminal justice.

The kingdom "encourages the Security Council to consider appropriate measures to ensure accountability in Syria and stresses the important role that international criminal justice could play in this regard," the draft resolution said.

It demanded that Syrian authorities lift blockade on humanitarian aid and relief operations and release persons arbitrarily detained.

Besides, it calls on the Syrian regime to abide by the recent U.N. Security Council resolution to dismantle its chemical stockpile.

The Saudi proposed document has also condemned the presence of foreign fighters in Syria particularly those belonging to Syrian regime backing group-Hezbollah.

The vote is expected within the first two weeks of November with no exact set date.

The U.N. General Assembly's Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee commonly referred to as the "Third Committee" deals with social, humanitarian affairs and human rights issues.

Assad's regime is accused of using chemical weapons in an attack that was carried on Aug. 21 on the outskirts of Damascus killing hundreds of people.

"Saudi draft resolution demands U.N. measures against Syria war crimes," [Al-Arabiya](#), 31 Oct 2013.

**My comments:** It seems pointless to flog Assad about destroying chemical weapons, when the OPCW process is going well, except that rebels have refused a cease fire that would allow two sites to be inspected. It is premature to prosecute anyone for war crimes in Syria, when the United Nations has not yet begun its investigation of *who* is responsible for the alleged war crimes. This proposed UN resolution looks like another *unenforceable* plea that will be ignored by Assad, the rebels, the jihadists, and the foreign meddlers.

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### 1 Nov 2013

Prof. Sellström's team of inspectors arrived in Syria for a second visit on 25 Sep 2013, and departed on 30 Sep. They were supposed to investigate whether or not chemical weapons had been used at seven sites in Syria from 19 March 2013 to 25 Aug. Their final report was due in late October 2013. However, there has been no mention of this team's work during October. I wonder if this work has been suppressed, to avoid complicating the preparations for the Geneva2 negotiations in November 2013 (e.g., for example by causing rebels and Syria to accuse each other of using chemical weapons, which is a diversion from the real issues of establishing a cease fire and a transitional government).

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The [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) announced a new death toll today: 120,296 have died in the civil war in Syria since 18 March 2011. Approximately 4800 people died in Syria during September 2013, while diplomats talked about chemical weapons in Syria — note that chemical weapons on 21 Aug killed fewer than 1500 people in Syria. Approximately 5100 people died in Syria during October 2013, while diplomats *talked* about the possibility of a Geneva2 conference. Negotiations about Syria appear futile, as documented in my [previous](#) essay and continuing [below](#).

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Russia said today that most of Syria's chemical weapons would be shipped to other nations for disposal:

Most of Syria's chemical weapons are likely to be taken abroad for disposal, a Russian first deputy foreign minister said Friday [1 Nov].

"There are many arguments in favor of taking the vast majority of the poisonous substances outside of the country's borders," Sergei Ryabkov said after talks with Dutch diplomat Sigrid Kaag, who heads an international mission to eradicate Syria's chemical arsenal.

"Syrian Chemical Arsenal Likely to Be Taken Abroad for Disposal," [RIA-Novosti](#), 1 Nov 2013.

This is *not* news. Disposal abroad was specified in the Russian-USA Framework on 14 Sep 2013: "removal of the largest amounts of weapons feasible, under OPCW supervision, and their destruction outside of Syria".

See also "Russia says better to remove most chemical weapons from Syria," [Al-Arabiya](#), 2 Nov 2013.

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### 2 Nov 2013

Nothing significant was reported on 2 Nov about chemical weapons in Syria.

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## History During 3-16 Nov 2013

### 3 Nov 2013

Saudi Arabia has increased its military aid to the rebels in Syria. See "Syrian conflict: Persian Gulf officials, tired of waiting for U.S., move to boost aid to rebels," [Washington Post](#), 3 Nov 2013. See also [Gulf News](#). The death rate in Syria of 5000/month was apparently not enough to satisfy the Saudis. <sarcastic smirk>

Later on 3 Nov, Kerry arrived in the capital of Saudi Arabia to smooth relations with the irritated Saudi government. [BBC](#), [france24.com](#), 3 Nov 2013.

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### 4 Nov 2013

Kerry met with King and Foreign Minister today, smoothed relations with Saudi Arabia. Everyone happy. Kerry flew to Poland, the next stop on his tour. [Associated Press](#), 11:26 EST, 4 Nov 2013.

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Today it was reported that commander Mohammad Jamalizadeh in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had been killed in Syria sometime recently. He was allegedly defending a Shiite mosque in a suburb of Damascus from "Wahhabi terrorists". He will be buried in Iran on 5 Nov. See "Iran Revolutionary Guards commander killed in Syria," [Reuters](#), 08:47 EST, 4 Nov 2013; "Iran Guards commander killed in Syria: reports," [france24.com](#); "Report: Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander killed in Syria," [Washington Post](#); "Reports: Iran Revolutionary Guards commander killed in Syria," [Al-Arabiya](#), 4 Nov 2013.

The recent death of commander Jamalizadeh raises fears that an unknown number of Iranians may be fighting in Syria to support Assad. This has happened before: on 12 Feb 2013, commander Hessem Khoshnevis from Iran's Revolutionary Guards was killed in Syria. [Reuters](#), 14 Feb 2013.

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### 5 Nov 2013

Today the director of the OPCW issued a progress report to the OPCW Executive Council: Addressing today the 34th meeting of the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Director-General Ahmet Uezuemcuc provided an [update](#) [PDF - 55 KB] on the progress made in the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria since the publication of his first Report, on 25 October 2013.

Ambassador Uezuemcuc informed the Council that verification and functional destruction activities had been completed within the deadlines of 27 October and 1 November, respectively, at all sites (21), except for two which could not be visited due to safety and security reasons. Items from these two sites had been moved to other accessible sites and verified against the disclosure submitted by Syria. The Director-

General added that "for the month of November, verification of destruction of category 3 chemical weapons [unfilled munitions] will continue, and destruction of specialised equipment and buildings at production, mixing and filling plants is also envisaged."

Category 3 chemical weapons are unfilled munitions. As of today, Syria has reported the destruction of 99 such warheads at one site, with another 55 warheads expected to be destroyed at a second site. Similar destruction work has commenced at five other sites.

Referring to the general plan for destruction of its chemical weapons programme submitted by Syria, the Director-General stated that Syria's proposal "that the destruction of chemical weapons be carried out outside of the country constitutes the most viable option." He noted that Syria's proposal was based on "practical challenges of carrying out destruction work in the midst of an armed conflict," as well as on "resource limitations."

The Director-General added that discussions aimed at finalising plans for the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria would commence soon with the participation of a Syrian delegation arriving in The Hague today.

The Director-General praised the courage, dedication and professionalism of OPCW inspectors and all other staff of the Joint Mission in challenging circumstances. Members of the Council commended the work of the inspection team and the accomplishments of the Joint Mission.

"Director-General Updates the Executive Council on the Work of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission," [OPCW](#), 5 Nov 2013.

The PDF update by the OPCW Director General, cited above, says:

I have reviewed the submission [of Syria's general plan] closely and have concluded that the proposal by Syria that destruction of chemical weapons be carried out outside its territory constitutes the most viable option available to fulfil the requirements established under EC decision [EC-M-33/DEC.1] and UNSC resolution 2118 for the safe and expeditious elimination of chemical weapons in Syria.

[update](#), page 2 of 3, 5 Nov 2013.

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U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, said the U.S. government is carefully scrutinizing 700-page inventory of chemical weapons that Syria submitted on 27 Oct. Reuters reports:

"We are still reviewing that document. We obviously bring skepticism born of years of dealing with this regime, years of obfuscation in other contexts, and of course a lot of broken promises in the context of this current war," Power said.

....

A second U.S. official, speaking separately to Reuters on condition of anonymity, said, intelligence provided "indications the Syrians may be intending to hold some of their stockpile in reserve."

The official said it was important that the international community keep the Syrian government's "feet to the fire" to ensure that all Syrian chemical weapons are destroyed.

"U.S. skeptical of Syria chemical arms declaration: U.N. envoy," [Global Post](#), 21:38 GMT, 5 Nov 2013.

See also the report by Agence France-Press: "US skeptical over Syria chemical declaration," [Global Post](#), 24:34 GMT, 5 Nov 2013; "US cynical of Syria chemical arms declaration," [Al-Jazeera](#), 6 Nov 2013.

One wonders if the decision to release the "skepticism" today was a U.S. government response to today's [failure](#) of the United Nations to schedule the Geneva2 negotiations this month. It seems *undiplomatic* to make an unsupported public allegation that Syria is expected to cheat. It would be better form to first find discrepancies, and then require additional inspections to resolve those discrepancies.

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In my previous essay on 14 Sep 2013, I wondered how much it will cost to destroy all of Syria's chemical weapons. Everyone seems to agree that Syria's chemical weapons *should* be destroyed, but there are no public estimates of the cost, except for Assad's estimate of a billion U.S. dollars (made on 17 Sep during a FoxNews interview). More importantly there are no volunteers to pay for the total cost of the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons.

Today, it was announced the OPCW had only enough money to fund its personnel in Syria through the end of November, about three weeks from today. See Anthony Deutsch, "Exclusive - Syrian chemical weapons mission funded only until end of month," [Reuters](#), 19:33 GMT, 5 Nov 2013. See also [Al-Arabiya](#).

There are approximately nine million people in Syria who need "humanitarian assistance" ([BBC](#)). Although no one says it publicly, these people are competing with OPCW with limited financial support from foreign nations. In this context, on 12 Nov the United Nations asked for donations of US\$ 300 million to help the Philippines recover from a recent typhoon that killed at least 2000 people and displaced at least 670,000 people. [UN](#)

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### 6-7 Nov 2013

OPCW has inspected one site that was previously unreachable because of the civil war. The OPCW used "footage from sealed cameras" to do the inspection. The United Nations issued a press release:

The Joint Mission of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations overseeing destruction of Syria's weapons stockpiles today confirmed verifying 22 of the 23 sites disclosed by Damascus.

"The additional site inspected is in the region of Aleppo and was one of the two sites that could not be visited earlier due to safety and security reasons," a UN spokesperson told journalists in New York.

"The site was confirmed as dismantled and long abandoned, with the building showing extensive battle damage," the spokesperson said.

The verification was conducted with the support of sealed cameras used by Syrian personnel as per the inspection team's guidance.

The exact geographical location and the time of capture of the footage and images were "fully authenticated", according to the information provided by the spokesperson. "Syria: joint OPCW-UN chemical weapons team verifies site in Aleppo," [UN](#), 7 Nov 2013. See also: "Further progress made by the team, following completion of 27 October and 1 November targets," [UN/OPCW](#), 6 Nov 2013.

This story was reported by journalists at: [Reuters](#) and [Al-Jazeera](#), 7 Nov 2013.

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OPCW has been giving press releases to journalists about chemical weapons in Syria, but failing to post those press releases at the OPCW website. At the OPCW website, there is now only one new daily [bulletin](#) since 6 Oct. That last bulletin is dated 11 Oct, but was first posted on 16 Oct. As I mentioned above, on 18 Oct, OPCW changed its website to omit the word "daily" from its list of bulletins on Syria.

On 7 Nov 2013, the United Nations established a spiffy new [website](#) for the joint United Nations/OPCW mission in Syria. This new website contains press releases back to 27 Sep 2013.

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### 8-9 Nov 2013

No significant news about chemical weapons on 8-9 Nov.

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### Red Cross Workers Attacked in Syria

I note that three employees of the International Red Cross have been missing since they were kidnapped by rebels in Syria on 13 Oct, four weeks ago. There is no mention of them by journalists, since repeated requests for their release only increases their ransom value. Nonetheless, it is important that these three not be forgotten.

The head of the Red Cross delegation in Syria wrote an editorial that was published in *The Washington Post*:

We at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are working across the front lines in Syria to help millions of needy people, despite escalating violence and worsening security conditions.

If allowed, we could do much more to reduce the suffering of civilians, but it is increasingly difficult for us to enter contested areas and assist Syrians, let alone to protect them.

Three ICRC staff members who were abducted Oct. 13 in Idlib, in northern Syria, are still being held by an armed group. This has forced us to restrict our movement in some areas. Repeated requests to Syrian authorities to enter Moadamiyeh and other towns under siege around Damascus have gone unanswered. Volunteers from our partners at the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) regularly come under attack while attempting to deliver food, blankets and other supplies or to evacuate the wounded. Recently, a SARC ambulance came under fire in the southern town of Daraa; in a separate attack, a SARC volunteer lost his legs.

Magne Barth, "Too many Syrians are missing out on needed aid," [Washington Post](#), 8 Nov 2013.

Reprinted as "Syrian conflict endangering aid groups," [Japan Times](#), 16 Nov 2013.

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### Albania says "No"

On 8 Nov, in a little-noticed news story, Agence France-Press reports that the U.S. government has asked the government of Albania if Albania would destroy the chemical weapons from Syria. The parliamentary speaker said: "I do not think that Albania has the capacity, even other much bigger and more developed countries do not accept to do it." [france24.com](#), 8 Nov 2013.

The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the USA has asked the government of Albania if Albania would destroy the chemical weapons from Syria. The weapons are now known to include 1,300 tons of chemical agents and precursors, and 1,200 tons of unfilled munitions. [LA Times](#), 10 Nov 2013.

On 12 Nov, the Albanian prime minister admitted that his nation had been asked to dispose of the highly toxic chemicals from Syria's weapons. [france24.com](#).

On 14 Nov, the Albanian government is seeking "financial rewards" for doing the dangerous chore of disposing of Syria's chemical weapons, in order to dispel domestic opposition. [Reuters](#), 14 Nov 2013.

On 15 Nov, the prime minister of Albania says "NO" to the U.S. government's request to destroy Syrian chemical weapons inside Albania. Reuters reports:

Albania rejected on Friday [15 Nov] a U.S. request to host the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, dealing a blow to a U.S.-Russian accord to eliminate the nerve agents from the country's protracted civil war.

Negotiations went down to the wire, delaying the scheduled adoption on Friday of a step-by-step plan to get rid of 1,300 tonnes of Syria's sarin, mustard and other agents.

Albania's refusal marked an unprecedented break from its traditionally staunch allegiance to NATO ally Washington. It followed a storm of protest in the Adriatic republic, where protesters complained of exploitation.

"Albanian 'No' deals blow to Syria chemical weapons plan," [Reuters](#), 19:33 GMT, 15 Nov 2013.

The BBC reports:

Albania will not allow the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons on its soil, the country's prime minister says.

....

However, France and Belgium have been named as possible alternative locations for destroying Syria's estimated 1,000 tonnes of chemical arms.

"Albania shuns Syria chemical weapons destruction," [BBC](#), 20:49 GMT, 15 Nov 2013.

I suspect that environmental protesters will appear in *any* nation that is considering destruction of chemical weapons. The "not in my backyard" feeling is universal: the concern is *not* what is best for the world, and *not* what is best for one nation. The concern is local fear of either accidental release of toxic chemicals or pollution from the degraded chemicals.

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### 11-12 Nov 2013

Reuters reports on 11 Nov:

Western powers will turn down a Syrian request for military transport equipment to ship out chemical weapons material, saying the armored trucks and other gear could be used to fight the revolt, diplomats told Reuters.

President Bashar al-Assad's administration presented what envoys from two Western governments called a "long shopping list" to fit out and protect road convoys from Damascus to the coast through the conflict zone. But, they said, the agency overseeing Syria's chemical disarmament [i.e., OPCW] would reject this on the grounds most items could aid Assad's army in the civil war.

....

Diplomats said Syria asked the OPCW on October 21 for dozens of armored vehicles, generators and field kitchens among gear it said it needed to move 1,300 tons of chemicals to the Mediterranean port of Latakia to fulfill a U.N.-backed deal to eliminate its capacity to engage in chemical warfare.

[Syria] also sought new communications links between Damascus and coastal towns, saying that would help secure the road for the dozens of containers required. ....

Anthony Deutsch, "West scorns Assad 'shopping list' for chemical convoys," [Reuters](#), 17:11 GMT, 11 Nov 2013.

See also: "Assad 'shopping list' includes military trucks from UN body," [Arab News](#), 11 Nov 2013.

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### 13 Nov 2013

Russia, who provided chemical weapons to Syria in the past, *may* give US\$ 2 million to OPCW for destruction of those weapons. Reuters says the USA has provided US\$ 6 million "in equipment, training and cash". [Reuters](#), 11:39 GMT, 13 Nov 2013. [Al-Arabiya](#).

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On 12 Nov, Saudi Arabia sent a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon that officially rejects the United Nations Security Council seat, which seat Saudi Arabia had previously sought and won. [france24.com](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); [Al-Jazeera](#).

This letter concludes the issue that I mentioned above on 18 Oct. In my opinion, the Saudi refusal to participate in the UN Security Council — after actively seeking a seat there — is a childish snit. Those who refuse to participate in a meeting are *not* making a constructive contribution.

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### 14 Nov 2013

Norway has promised to send two ships, "a civilian cargo ship and a Navy frigate to Syrian ports to pick up the stockpiles and carry them elsewhere for destruction." [Associated Press](#), 12:08 EST, 14 Nov 2013; [Al-Arabiya](#).

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Back on 7 Nov, I noted that the UN/OPCW had established a spiffy new website. Unfortunately, on 14 Nov, the most recent document is dated 6 Nov. OPCW still has a problem in communicating with the world.

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### 15 Nov 2013

On 15 Nov, the OPCW adopted a plan for the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria.

The OPCW Executive Council (EC) approved today a detailed plan of destruction to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. In the plan, Syrian chemical weapons will be transported for destruction outside its territory to ensure their destruction in the "safest and soonest manner", and no later than June 30th 2014.

....

The plan envisions the removal of all declared chemical substances and precursors, except for isopropanol, from Syria no later than 5 February 2014 with the "most critical" chemicals to be transported out of Syria by 31 December 2013. Syrian declared chemical weapons facilities, will undergo sequenced destruction from 15 December 2013 to 15 March 2014 according to a risk-based criterion.

With respect to activities outside Syria, the Executive Council decided that the destruction of the priority chemical weapons will be completed by 31 March 2014 and all other declared chemical materials by 30 June 2014.

The OPCW Director-General will present a specific plan for the destruction of Syrian



chemicals outside the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic which includes provisions for ensuring clear responsibility at each stage for all chemicals and takes into account all relevant consideration, including target dates, requirements for safety and security, and overall costs. The Director-General is also requested to establish a special Trust Fund for this purpose and to keep the Executive Council informed on progress and if target dates will be modified.

Reporting on the progress on the ground, the Director-General informed the Executive Council that the OPCW-UN Joint Mission was able to verify the destruction of over 60 percent of Syria's declared unfilled munitions to date. As per the Executive Council decision, the Syrian Arab Republic has committed to destroy all unfilled munitions, composed of warheads and bombs, by 31 January 2014.

"OPCW adopts plan for destruction of Syria's chemical weapons programme in the first half of 2014," [UN/OPCW](#), 15 Nov 2013.

The OPCW plan was delayed this afternoon, in the hopes that destruction of the chemical weapons in Albania could be included. But late in the afternoon, the Albanian prime minister said "NO", so the detail of where the weapons would be destroyed was omitted from the OPCW plan. [Reuters](#).

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### Islamic Beheading

Members of the Al-Qaeda group, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), captured a fighter who — after ISIS misunderstood his prayers — ISIS believed was a Shiite who was fighting for Assad's government. So the ISIS jihadis, who are Sunni Muslims, beheaded the captured infidel fighter. Then the ISIS jihadis gleefully posed for a video, showing his decapitated head. But a rebel group recognized the head as one of their commanders, Mohammed Fares Maroush. So ISIS "asked for forgiveness". [BBC](#), 15 Nov; [The Telegraph](#), 14 Nov; [CNN](#), 14-15 Nov; [NY Times](#), 15 Nov; [france24.com](#), 15 Nov; [Arab News](#), 16 Nov 2013.

*Al-Bawaba* has the headline: "ISIS accidentally beheads allied rebel fighter". But ISIS intended to behead him. It was a deliberate act, **not** an accident. *Afterwards*, they decided it was a mistake. [Al-Bawaba](#), 14 Nov.

Jennifer James, wrote a sarcastic story for *Al-Bawaba* in Jordan with the headline: "Islamic extremists 'on again off forever' love affair with beheading". [Al-Bawaba](#). See also "OOPS — OUR BAD! Syrian rebels mistakenly behead one of their own," [Catholic Online](#), 15 Nov 2013. I suggest that ISIS use duct tape to reattach his head to his body, which should make him almost as good as new. I am sorry, but reading about Islamic atrocities has made me sarcastic.

Amongst civilized nations, it is a war crime to execute a captured soldier. To execute him because he had the wrong religion is simply *unforgivable*.

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16 Nov 2013

The U.S. Army announced it was scrapping incinerators used for destruction of chemical weapons at sites in Alabama, Oregon, Utah, and Arkansas. The Associated Press article did *not* mention the cost to construct the incinerators, instead the military bundled the cost of construction with the costs of operating the incinerators. This total cost is US\$ 10.2 billion. U.S. taxpayers are paying an additional US\$ 1.3 billion to destroy the incinerators. Jay Reeves, "Army Scrapping 4 US Chemical Weapons Incinerators," [Associated Press](#), 17:17 EST, 16 Nov 2013. Copy at [Washington Times](#).

It seems hypocritical of the USA to ask foreign nations (e.g., Norway, Albania) to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, when americans are *unwilling* to do it in the USA with existing facilities. News reports say that statutes enacted by the U.S. Congress require the destruction of the incinerators and also forbid the importation of chemical weapons in the USA, but these statutes could be changed more easily than building new incinerators somewhere.

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## History During 17-30 Nov 2013

### 17 Nov 2013

I note that three employees of the International Red Cross have been missing since they were kidnapped by rebels in Syria on 13 Oct, five weeks ago. There is no mention of them by journalists, since repeated requests for their release only increases their ransom value. Nonetheless, it is important that these three not be forgotten.

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### 18 Nov 2013

On 18 Nov, Belgium refused to destroy Syria's chemical weapons. The Associated Press reported:

Not a single European Union nation came forward on Monday [18 Nov] offering to host the destruction of Syria's poison gas stockpile, with many instead calling for the arsenal to be eradicated close to Syria itself.

Belgium had been considered a strong candidate after the withdrawal of Albania, but Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders said that "we have to find a way to send experts and the technology on site."

"To transport them over long distances to bring them on our soil we do not really see how to do that, and not only in Belgium, also in other European states," Reynders said, highlighting a reluctance found across the 28 EU nations.

"There is no member state that has come forward in saying 'OK, give us the stuff'," said Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans.

After Albania refused to take on the task Friday, Belgium as well as France had been considered possible candidates, if only because Belgium has a long history of destroying the gas arsenal from World War I.

....

Poison gas was first used in Belgium during World War I, and many thousands of canisters still lie buried in the farm fields straddling western Belgium and northern France. Belgium still has operational forces specialized in neutralizing the gas. "No EU Nation Candidate To Destroy Syria Gas," [Associated Press](#), 15:01 EST, 18 Nov 2013.

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### 19 Nov 2013 Religious Persecution in Syria

On Sunday, 17 Nov, there was an international colloquium in Vaduz, Lichtenstein to discuss religious persecution in Syria. Although delegates from various churches attended, and Brahimi attended, the colloquium was *not* reported by any of major news agencies (e.g., Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse).

On 19 Nov, there was a burst of news reports about the religious dimension to the fighting in Syria. Some of those reports incidentally mentioned the colloquium in Vaduz.

The Syrian patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic church urged Christians in Syria not to emigrate. [DailyStar](#) in Lebanon, 19 Nov 2013.

The Russian Orthodox Church is warning of genocide against Christians in Syria. [TASS](#), 18 Nov; [Al-Bawaba](#), 19 Nov.

The Russian news agency, TASS, reported:

Russia is worried over attempts to add religious backing to the Syrian conflict, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Tuesday [19 Nov] at a meeting with a delegation of the Syrian government.

"Both in Syria and in neighboring countries, and in Iraq, there are a lot of those who seek to split the Shiites and the Sunnis," he said. "These people take colossal responsibility for undermining the pillars which bear the world religion."

According to the Russian foreign minister, their actions are most damaging to religious minorities. "We are very much worried over attacks on the Christina shrines in Syria," he stressed.

"Russia worried over attempts to add religious backing to Syrian conflict," [TASS](#), 19 Nov 2013.

On 23 June 2013, and now forgotten, al-Nusra Front is reported to have beheaded two Christians — including Francois Murad, a Catholic priest — in Homs, Syria. [PressTV](#), 28

June 2013; [Daily Mail](#) in UK, 1 July 2013. But *The Telegraph* says that priest was actually shot and killed in a church on 23 June. [The Telegraph](#), 1 July 2013. See also: [Cybercast News](#), 3 July 2013; [Fides](#), 24 June 2013; [Vatican Radio](#), 25 June 2013. It seems clear that Fr. Murad was murdered by al-Nusra Front.

In late October 2013, the Christian town of Sadad in Syria was invaded by jihadists. Approximately 45 innocent christian civilians were murdered by the jihadists and dumped in a mass grave. The Syrian Archbishop said: "All the houses of Sadad were robbed and property looted. The churches are damaged and desecrated, deprived of old books and precious furniture." [Fides](#), 31 Oct 2013; [Zenit](#), 5 Nov 2013.

**My opinion:** As Dr. Kissinger remarked on 22 Sep 2013, the civil war in Syria is a *religious* dispute between Sunnis (rebel) and Shiites (Assad's government). The jihadists, who are mostly Sunnis, have added ferocity to the religious dimension. I mentioned [above](#) that an Al-Qaeda group, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), had beheaded a captured soldier who they (mistakenly) believed was a Shiite. It seems that the jihadis are equal-opportunity bigots who will kill *anyone* who has a different religious view than theirs.

Earlier, Assad's government presented itself as the upholder of law-and-order against terrorists. Now, Assad's government seems to present itself as the upholder of religious tolerance, against the jihadists and others who discriminate against Christians. While there is some truth in what Assad's government says, it is still propaganda.

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### 19 Nov 2013 Al-Qaeda Attack in Lebanon

On 19 Nov, an Al-Qaeda group exploded two bombs outside the Iranian embassy in Beirut Lebanon, in apparent retaliation for Iranian support of Assad's government in Syria. Initial reports say at least 23 people were killed and 146 people were injured. This is an example of the Syrian civil war spilling into neighboring nations. [france24.com](#), 19 Nov 2013; [Reuters](#), 14:41 GMT, 19 Nov 2013; [Washington Post](#), 19 Nov 2013.

*Al-Jazeera* reported the Lebanese group, linked to al-Qaeda, that claimed responsibility for the two bombings: "... has said the attack is a 'message of blood and death' to Iran and Hezbollah — both supporters of Syrian President Bashar Assad." [Al-Jazeera](#), 20 Nov 2013.

In an example of propaganda run amok, the Iranian Foreign Ministry blamed "the Zionist Israeli regime and its mercenaries" for the attack ([PressTV](#)), even though genuine Islamic terrorists had claimed responsibility for the attack.

Four days after the bombing, the death toll was 29. [Daily Star](#), 23 Nov 2013.

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### 20 Nov 2013 Destroy Chemicals at Sea?

OPCW mentioned the possibility of destroying Syria's chemical weapons at sea:

Syria's over 1,000 tonnes of chemical weapons and precursors could be destroyed at sea if no country agrees to dispose of them on its soil, the world's chemical watchdog said Wednesday [20 Nov].

"This possibility has been looked at for some time already," Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) spokesman Christian Chartier told AFP of destroying the chemicals at sea.

"It's still being looked at and is one of several solutions envisaged by member states and as long as a decision has not been taken, it remains a possibility," Chartier said. "Syria chemical weapons could be 'destroyed at sea'," [Al-Arabiya](#), 20 Nov 2013. See also [Arab News](#), 20 Nov 2013, which adds: "the dumping of chemical-filled munitions at sea was 'routine' before the 1980 Oslo Treaty prohibited it."

I searched for the original AFP story at the AFP website and at the [france24.com](#) website, but was unable to find it. [Reuters](#) reported the story at 22:29 GMT, 19 Nov. On 21 Nov, the most recent press release at the UN/OPCW website is dated 15 Nov.

On 23 Nov, *Al-Jazeera* reported an exclusive interview with the Director General of OPCW: Destruction of Syria's chemical weapons at sea is safe and feasible, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has told Al Jazeera, as a December deadline to complete the task fast approaches.

Some 798 tonnes of chemicals and 7.7 million litres of effluent need to be transported and disposed off, the OPCW said.

"Everything will be done according to the international regulations and in a very safe manner and all measures, in fact, will be taken appropriately either during the transportation of those substances by ship and also during the destruction," Ahmet Uzumcu, OPCW director general, told Al Jazeera in an exclusive interview.

Uzumcu also said they expect America to be at the forefront of the process. "We expect that they will take the lead," he said.

"There are already some facilities manufactured by the US that can be installed easily on a ship or on land."

The world is in agreement about destroying Syria's chemical weapons as part of a US-Russia deal aimed at heading off strikes on the Damascus regime after deadly chemical attacks in August.

Despite consensus on destroying the chemicals outside war-racked Syria, no country has volunteered to have them destroyed on its soil. "Syria weapons 'could be destroyed at sea'," [Al-Jazeera](#), 23 Nov 2013.

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21 Nov 2013

On 21 Nov, OPCW asked private corporations to submit "an expression of interest" (EOI) in destroying Syria's chemical weapons:

The OPCW calls for an expression of interest (EOI) for the services specified in the attached EOI with Reference Number: OPCW/CDB/EOI/01/2013.

The EOI seeks to identify commercial companies interested in participating in a potential tendering process for the treatment and disposal of hazardous and non-hazardous organic and inorganic chemicals, and related packaging materials and containers/drums associated with the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.

Download: [Request for Expression of Interest \(EOI\) Reference Number: OPCW/CDB EOI/01/2013](#) [PDF - 160 KB]

In order to be considered as a potential supplier, interested companies are invited to submit an EOI including the company information requested in the Supplier Response Form attached to the EOI document.

Please submit your EOI no later than the closing date of Friday 29 November 2013 at 16:00hrs CET by email or fax to the contact addresses below.

"Expression of Interest (EOI) Reference Number: OPCW/CDB EOI/01/2013," [OPCW](#), 21 Nov 2013.

Thanks to Agence France-Presse for noticing this obscure item. [france24.com](#), 21:42, 21 Nov 2013.

My sarcastic comment is that it would be really swell if the company has enough financial muscle to influence (i.e., bribe) the legislative and executive branches of a government of some nation, who would agree to host the destruction inside their border.

Later, UN/OPCW posted to their website a news release that the solicitation of bids from private companies was a suggestion made by the Executive Council of OPCW on 15 Nov:

In accordance with the decision of the OPCW Executive Council's adopted on 15 November 2013 which requested the Director-General of the Organisation to explore 'options for destruction in commercial chemical disposal facilities' of a range of chemicals declared by Syria, the OPCW has invited commercial chemical disposal firms to convey to it their expressions of interest (EOI).

The EOI document lists 18 chemicals, mostly bulk commodity chemicals including some that are used and traded worldwide. A significant amount of Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme includes chemicals that fall in the category of common industrial chemicals or otherwise chemicals that can safely be rendered harmless or destroyed.

The companies will be selected through a tendering process in accordance with established procedures.

The chemicals to be disposed off commercially are estimated at 800 metric tons,

accounting for a major part of the Syrian stockpile. Internationally accepted safety and environmental regulations will be strictly observed.

The commercial companies will also destroy the effluent resulting from the higher priority chemicals that will separately undergo "effective destruction," as per the Executive Council Decision.

The estimated costs relating to the destruction activities to be undertaken by commercial companies is estimated at 35 to 40 million Euros.

A specific Trust Fund was established on 19 November 2013 and the OPCW Director-General has called on all States Parties in a position to do so to provide voluntary contributions in support of the mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria. "Commercial chemical companies invited to dispose of a significant part of chemicals from Syria," [UN/OPCW](#), 22 Nov 2013.

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#### 22 Nov 2013

Seven Islamist groups merged on 22 Nov, as described [below](#).

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#### 23-24 Nov 2013

On the night of 23 Nov, Iran finally agreed to a six-month pause in their attempt to build nuclear weapons. That news story pushed Syria out of the news.

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#### 25 Nov 2013

Geneva2 was finally scheduled, as explained [below](#).

*Al-Jazeera* reports its interview with the director of OPCW:

Weapons inspectors are disarming Syria of its chemical weapons and everything seems to have been going according to plan. But now a crisis appears to be looming.

By December 31, the inspectors will move the most dangerous chemical weapons from Syria to a ship for final their destination and destruction. But, so far, no country has agreed to accept the shipment.

Some 798 tonnes of chemicals and 7.7 million litres of effluent need to be transported and disposed of, but the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is overseeing the disarmament, insists that the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons at sea is safe and feasible.

"Ahmet Uzumcu: 'Destroying Syria's weapons'," [Al-Jazeera](#), 25 Nov 2013.

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**26-27 Nov 2013**

No news on 26-27 Nov about chemical weapons in Syria.

Reuters reports about barbaric activities inside Syria:

The U.N. document entitled "Humanitarian Situation and Response in Syria" .... describes a "dangerous and difficult environment for humanitarian workers" and says 12 U.N. staff and 32 volunteers or staff of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent have been killed since the conflict began in March 2011. Another 21 U.N. staff members remain in detention, it said, without giving details.

Stephanie Nebehay, "Exclusive — U.N. says Syria combatants stymie aid effort," [Reuters](#), 20:25 GMT, 26 Nov 2013.

In this context, note that three of the Red Cross workers kidnapped on Syria on 13 Oct 2013 are still being held, after more than six weeks. (See above, for 13-14 Oct, 18 Oct, 8 Nov.)

Reuters reports that Al-Qaeda is kidnapping and torturing, and sometimes killing, pro-democracy activists in Syria. [Reuters](#), 05:34 GMT, 27 Nov 2013.

*Arab News* reports: "Meanwhile, the jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant executed a rebel battalion leader in northern Syria, accusing him of 'apostasy'." [Arab News](#), 27 Nov 2013.

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**28 Nov 2013**

The Associated Press reports:

Destroying Syria's deadliest chemical weapons on land would come with vexing diplomatic and security problems as well as environmental issues. To avoid those potential troubles, U.S. officials say, the Obama administration is exploring the use of a government-owned ship to carry out the disposal in international waters.

Under a plan yet to be approved, the chemicals would be transported to the MV Cape Ray in the Mediterranean Sea. The nearly 700-foot ship, based in Portsmouth, Va., and owned by the Transportation Department's Maritime Administration, would be outfitted with a special system to neutralize the chemical material. U.S. warships would provide an escort and security.

The decision to proceed with the chemical disposal plan at sea would be made by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a global chemical weapons watchdog agency with 190 member states. In a statement Wednesday in the Netherlands, the watchdog agency said the effort to ship Syria's chemical arsenal out of the country "continues to pose challenges due to the security situation on the ground."

Lolita C. Baldor and Pauline Jelinek, "AP Sources: Plan Calls For Ship To Destroy Weapons," [Associated Press](#), 09:10 GMT, 28 Nov 2013.

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The Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) captured seven Syrian rebels from "a moderate Islamist group", tried them in an Islamic court operated by ISIL, then executed them with gunshots to the head. Reuters says the executions are part of a "campaign to marginalise other groups." [Reuters](#), 12:10 GMT, 28 Nov 2013; [Daily Mail](#), 15:42 GMT, 28 Nov 2013; [Arab News](#), 29 Nov 2013. My comment is simple: ISIL seems to be proving that it is worse than Assad.

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### 29 Nov 2013

Reuters reports:

More than two dozen companies have expressed interest in destroying Syria's chemical weapons stockpile, sources at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), told Reuters on Friday [29 Nov].

Anthony Deutsch, "Dozens of firms interested in destroying Syrian chemicals — OPCW sources," [Reuters](#), 16:10 GMT, 29 Nov 2013.

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### 30 Nov 2013

OPCW issued a news article:

In a statement to the OPCW Executive Council on Friday 29 November 2013, Director-General Ahmet Uzumcu announced that the United States has offered to contribute a destruction technology, full operational support and financing to neutralise Syria's priority chemicals, which are to be removed from the country by 31 December.

The Director-General stated that the neutralisation operations will be conducted on a U.S. vessel at sea using hydrolysis. Currently a suitable naval vessel is undergoing modifications to support the operations and to accommodate verification activities by the OPCW.

Regarding the destruction of Syria's inventory of other chemicals, including common industrial ones — which constitute a significant part of Syria's declaration — the Director-General said the OPCW has to date received 35 expressions of interest (EOI) from commercial companies, which will now undergo evaluation. This number may change during the tender process, he noted, stressing that the OPCW "is at the preliminary stage of ascertaining the availability of suitable candidate companies."

"United States offers to destroy Syria's Priority Chemicals," [OPCW](#), 30 Nov 2013.

The Associated Press reports:

The U.S. has offered to help destroy some of the most lethal parts of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile at an offshore facility, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons said Saturday [30 Nov].

The international organization's director-general, Ahmet Uzumcu, said in The Hague, Netherlands that the U.S. government will contribute "a destruction technology, full operational support and financing to neutralize" the weapons, most likely on a ship in

the Mediterranean Sea. The weapons are to be removed from Syria by Dec. 31.

Separately, [Sigrid Kaag said at a news conference in Damascus] ... laid out some logistical details. Importantly, the weapons will first be packaged and transported from multiple sites within Syria to the country's largest port, Latakia. Then they will be loaded onto ships owned by other OPCW members before a second hand-off to U.S. vessels.

....

The OPCW also wants nearly 800 tons of dual-use chemicals, many of which are common industrial chemicals, to be removed by Feb. 5 and later destroyed by private companies as part of the organization's ambitious plan to completely eradicate Syria's chemical weapons program by mid-2014.

Uzumcu said in a statement 35 private companies have applied so far to participate and are at an early stage of being vetted. He also called on governments of the 190 countries that belong to the OPCW to contribute funds to the effort, or by contracting directly with companies to help destroy chemicals.

Toby Sterling and Albert Aji, "US Offers To Destroy Syrian Chemical Weapons"  
[Associated Press](#), 13:01 GMT, 30 Nov 2013.

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## History During 1-13 Dec 2013

### 1 Dec 2013

The report from Prof. Sellström's team of inspectors is now one month overdue. (See [above](#).) Despite all of the whining during August and September 2013 by politicians and diplomats about "war crimes" involving alleged use of chemical weapons, we still do *not* know if chemical weapons were used more than once in Syria. And the United Nations has *not yet begun* an investigation into *who* used the chemical weapons. The world seems to have a short attention span, perhaps because there are so many crises clamoring for attention.

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### 2 Dec 2013

#### November 2013 death toll in Syria

On 2 Dec 2013, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that 125,835 people had died in the Syrian civil war from 18 March 2011 up to 1 Dec 2013. [SOHR](#), 2 Dec 2013.

Approximately 5540 people died in Syria during November 2013, while diplomats *talked* about the possibility of a Geneva2 conference in January 2014.

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### 2 Dec 2013

## War Crimes?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, held a press conference in Geneva on 2 Sep on alleged war crimes in Syria. She claims to have "massive evidence ... [of] very serious crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity" in Syria since March 2011. She told reporters: "They point to the fact that the evidence indicates responsibility at the highest level of government, including the head of state." Journalists quickly reported that evidence of war crimes implicated Assad.

See:

- "Top U.N. Rights Official Links Assad to Crimes in Syria," [NY Times](#), 2 Dec;
- "U.N. evidence on Syria war crimes implicates Assad, Pillay says," [Reuters](#), 10:57 EST, 2 Dec 2013;
- "Syria war crimes evidence implicates Assad: UN," [france24.com](#), 14:54, 2 Dec 2013;
- "UN implicates Bashar al-Assad in Syria war crimes," [BBC](#), 2 Dec 2013;
- "UN: Syria Crimes Evidence 'indicates' Assad Role," [Associated Press](#), 15:48 EST, 2 Dec 2013;
- "UN: Evidence links Assad to Syria war crimes," [Al-Jazeera](#), 2 Dec 2013;
- "U.N. says Syrian govt. committed war crimes," [Al-Arabiya](#), 2 Dec 2013;
- "UN evidence on Syria war crimes implicates Assad, Pillay says," [Arab News](#), 2 Dec 2013;
- "'Massive evidence' links Syrian regime to war crimes, U.N. official says," [CNN](#), 2 Dec 2013.

I comment that let us not forget about atrocities perpetrated by Al-Qaeda in Syria, by the jihadists in Syria, and by the rebels in Syria. Justice requires prosecution of everyone who committed similar crimes. The selective prosecution of people who we do not like, while others who committed similar crimes go unprosecuted, is *not* Justice.

The Associated Press reports:

Pillay said she worries about striking the right balance in determining how long to keep the information secret. The lists "rightly belongs to the people who suffered violations," she said, but they also must be kept sealed "to preserve the presumption of innocence" until proper judicial probes can be done that could lead to trial.

"UN: Syria Crimes Evidence 'indicates' Assad Role," [Associated Press](#), 15:48 EST, 2 Dec 2013.

My comment is the secret list belongs to the United Nations agency that created it, *not* to the victims. Pillay has already destroyed Assad's presumption of innocence with her inflammatory remarks, backed by secret evidence that Assad can not refute, because Assad can not see the so-called evidence.

*Al-Jazeera* reported:

[Pillay's] blunt remarks about the head of state were at odds with a policy of keeping the identity of alleged perpetrators under wraps pending any judicial process.

....

But Pillay said even she could not unseal the confidential lists, and insisted she was only repeating what the investigators led by Paulo Pinheiro, a Brazilian expert, had said.

When Pillay was asked to clarify her remarks, she said: "Let me say that I have not said that a head of state is a suspect. I was quoting the fact-finding mission, which said that based on their facts, responsibility points at the highest level."

"UN: Evidence links Assad to Syria war crimes," [Al-Jazeera](#), 2 Dec 2013.

Pillay has *repeatedly* called for Syrian war crimes to be referred to the International Criminal Court. See, e.g.,

- "Syria should be referred to ICC, UN's Navi Pillay says," [BBC](#), 13 Dec 2011;
- "Syria 'should be referred to the ICC' — UN's Pillay," [BBC](#), 1 June 2012;
- "UN human rights chief renews call on Security Council to refer Syria to ICC," [UN](#) 2 July 2012;
- "UN Panel Concludes War Crimes Perpetrated In Syria," [Associated Press](#), 15 Aug 2012;
- "UN Urged To Refer Syria To War Crimes Court," [Associated Press](#), 11 Jan 2013;
- "Pillay renews call to refer Syria to world criminal court," [UN](#), 13 Feb 2013;
- "UN Panel Says Syria War Crimes Should Go To Trial," [Associated Press](#), 18 Feb 2013;
- [UN](#), 29 May 2013;
- [UN](#), 29 Aug 2013;
- "Is prosecuting Assad a better option than Syria strike?," [Canadian Broadcasting Corp.](#), 7 Sep 2013.

On 2 Dec 2013 she *again* called for the matter of Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for investigation and possible prosecution. However, the [BBC](#) explains: Syria is not a state party to the ICC and therefore any investigation into the conflict would need to be mandated by the Security Council. However, Russia and China have a veto on the council and would be highly unlikely to let such a move pass.

"UN implicates Bashar al-Assad in Syria war crimes," [BBC](#), 2 Dec 2013.

By now, Pillay must know that it is futile for her to call for referral of Syrian war crimes to the International Criminal Court. Repeated — and futile — calls for war crimes prosecution does *not* create respect for international law. Instead, repeated calls for prosecution shows that some people are effectively immune from prosecution, because they are protected by a political ally. Incidentally, the U.S. president is protected in the same way as Assad: the USA is not a party to the International Criminal Court.

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### 2 Dec 2013 Islamic Kidnapping of Christian Nuns

While Pillay was in a stew about Assad's alleged war crimes, on 2 Dec jihadists removed

12 nuns and 3 other women from the Greek Orthodox Mar Takla convent in the village of Maaloula, Syria. The Associated Press says: "The nuns are the latest Christian clergy members to be abducted. Two bishops were seized in rebel-held areas in April, and an Italian Jesuit priest, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, went missing in July after traveling to meet militants in Raqqa. None has been heard from since." To be fair, it is not clear whether the nuns were kidnapped, or whether they were evacuated by jihadists for their safety. [Associated Press](#), 3 Dec; [Reuters](#), 3 Dec; [Al-Jazeera](#), 2 Dec.

On 4 Dec, the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, called for prayers for the dozen abducted Syrian nuns. The Pope unambiguously said the nuns had been "kidnapped" and "taken by force". [Vatican Radio](#), [Al-Arabiya](#), [Associated Press](#), all on 4 Dec 2013.

Both Russia and Iran condemned the apparent kidnapping of the nuns. "Russia's Foreign Ministry and the Russian Orthodox Church have demanded the release of a group of nuns reportedly captured by Islamist rebels at an ancient convent in Syria." [RIA-Novosti](#), 4 Dec 2013. "Iranian Foreign Ministry condemned desecration of churches by rebel groups in Syria and abduction of 12 nuns in the predominantly Christian town of Maaloula[,] asking for their immediate and unconditional release." [Tasnim News Agency](#), 5 Dec 2013. The Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman said: "Certainly this act was taken with the aim of fueling the sedition in Syria and [differences] between followers of divine religions who have been living side by side in peace for centuries" in Syria. [PressTV](#) in Iran; also [FARS](#) in Iran, both on 5 Dec 2013.

Sadly, this story disappeared from Western news media on 5 Dec. Three Red Cross workers who were kidnapped in Syria on 13 Oct are also forgotten. (See above, for 13-14 Oct, 18 Oct, 8 Nov.)

My comment: Islamic kidnappings and desecration of Christian churches are another way that the jihadists and Al-Qaeda make Syria worse than Assad's government. Maybe Pillay could advocate war crimes trials for jihadists and Al-Qaeda in Syria.

On Sunday, 8 Dec, the 12 nuns and 3 other women were still missing in Syria. [Associated Press](#), 8 Dec.

On Saturday, 14 Dec, the "Al Habib Al Moustafa" jihadist group said it was seeking the release of hundreds of female activists from Syrian government prisons in exchange for freeing the dozen nuns. This offer clearly shows that the nuns were kidnapped and are now hostages. [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), 6 Dec; [Al-Bawaba](#), 14 Dec; [Vatican Radio](#), 14 Dec.

The Pope did *not* mention Syria during his midnight [Mass](#) on 24 Dec 2013. The Pope mentioned Syria during his Urbi et Orbi [Message](#) on 25 Dec 2013:

Too many lives have been shattered in recent times by the conflict in Syria, fueling hatred and vengeance. Let us continue to ask the Lord to spare the beloved Syrian people further suffering, and to enable the parties in conflict to put an end to all violence and guarantee access to humanitarian aid. We have seen how powerful prayer is! And I am happy today too, that the followers of different religious confessions are joining us in our prayer for peace in Syria. Let us never lose the courage of prayer! The

courage to say: Lord, grant your peace to Syria and to the whole world. And I also invite non-believers to desire peace with that yearning that makes the heart grow: all united, either by prayer or by desire. But all of us, for peace.

There was *no* mention by the Pope in his Urbi et Orbi Message of the 12 nuns who were kidnapped in Syria on 2 Dec.

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### 6 Dec 2013

OPCW announced it had destroyed *all* of Syria's unfilled munitions that were designed to deliver chemical weapons.

The OPCW UN Joint Mission in Syria has now verified that all Category 3 (unfilled) munitions declared by the Syrian Arab Republic have been destroyed.

The team has also verified the destruction of additional special features of buildings and structures at chemical weapons production facilities that were already rendered inoperable during the first phase of the mission.

These activities were conducted at the Homs cluster of sites that had remained inaccessible for some time due to security reasons.

[OPCW](#), 6 Dec 2013.

See also: [Associated Press](#), 6 Dec 2013.

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On 6 Dec, Jordan was elected to take the seat on the United Nations Security Council that had been rejected by Saudi Arabia.

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### 7-11 Dec 2013

Nothing significant about Syria reported by journalists.

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### 12 Dec 2013 Prof. Sellström's Report

Prof. Sellström's team of inspectors submitted their Report to the Secretary General of the United Nations on 12 Dec. (See [1 Nov](#) and [1 Dec](#), above. Also see 25 Sep and 30 Sep in my previous [essay](#).) The inspectors examined a total of seven sites, including the previously investigated site at Ghouta, where chemical weapons were used on 21 August 2013. Of the six new sites of alleged chemical weapons use, they found evidence that chemical weapons were used at four sites. They found chemical signatures of Sarin from victims at two of these four sites. Because of poor security conditions, the inspectors were able to personally visit only two of the six new sites. Note that the task of the inspectors was only to determine whether chemical weapons had been used, but *not* to determine who used the chemical weapons.

United Nations [Press Release](#), 12 Dec 2013. Official copy of the [Report](#).

My terse summary of the Report for each of the seven sites in Syria:

1. **Khan al-Assal, 19 March 2013** Reported by Syrian government as attack by terrorists. (¶5) Inspectors did *not* visit site, because of poor security. (¶48, 56-57) "Credible information" that chemical weapons were used. (¶111)
2. **Sheikh Maqsood, 13 April** Lack of information. (¶74-76) Inspectors "cannot corroborate the allegation that chemical weapons were used". (¶121)
3. **Saraqeb, 29 April** Inspectors did *not* visit site. (¶68-69) Chemical signature of Sarin found in organs from fatally wounded victim. (¶72) "Suggests" that chemical weapons used. (¶115)
4. **Ghouta, 21 August** "Clear and convincing evidence" that chemical weapons were used. (¶109) See Report of 15 Sep 2013 and Appendix 5 of Report of 12 Dec 2013.
5. **Bahhariyeh, 22 August** Reported by Syrian government. (¶24) Inspectors did *not* visit site. (¶81-82) Inspectors "cannot corroborate the allegation that chemical weapons were used". (¶119)
6. **Jobar, 24 August** Reported by Syrian government. (¶25) Chemical signature of Sarin found in samples from victims. (¶95-96) Chemical weapons "probably" used. (¶113)
7. **Ashrafiyah Sahnaya, 25 August 2013** Reported by Syrian government. (¶26) Inspectors did *not* visit site. (¶102-103) "Suggests" that chemical weapons used. (¶117)

This news story was widely reported by journalists on 12 Dec 2013:

- "UN Chief Gets Report On Syria Chemical Weapons Use," [Associated Press](#), 16:46 EST
- "UN Inspectors Say Chemical Weapons Were Used In Syria, Probably In Several Locations." [Associated Press](#), 17:23 EST
- "U.N. confirms chemical arms were used repeatedly in Syria," [Reuters](#), 23:24 GMT
- "UN: Multiple chemical attacks likely in Syria," [Al-Jazeera](#)
- "Syria chemical arms 'probably used' in five cases, UN finds," [BBC](#).

On Friday, 13 Dec 2013, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon addressed the General Assembly:

Today, I note with deep concern that the team collected evidence and information corroborating allegations that chemical weapons were used on several occasions at multiple sites against both civilians and military targets.

While the Mission was unable to independently verify every aspect of these allegations, its assessment is that chemical weapons were probably used on 19 March at Khan Al

Asal, on 24 August at Jobar, on 29 April at Saraqueb and on 25 August 2013 at Ashrafiah Sahnaya.

....

When it comes to chemical weapons, the international community speaks with one voice: any use of chemical weapons, by anyone, under any circumstances, is a grave violation of the 1925 Protocol and other relevant rules of customary international law. I deplore in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons in Syria as an offense against the universal values of humankind.

The international community has a moral and political responsibility to hold accountable those responsible, to deter future incidents and to ensure that chemical weapons can never re-emerge as an instrument of warfare.

....

.... As Syrians prepare to work for a political solution at next month's conference on Syria, I appeal to all parties to demonstrate their leadership and vision by ceasing hostilities and instead working to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people as they seek freedom and dignity. I call on the international community to do everything in its power to achieve this outcome.

Ban Ki-moon, "Remarks to the General Assembly on the Final Report of the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," [UN](#), 13 Dec 2013.

Ban's speech to the General Assembly was reported by some journalists: [Associated Press](#), 13 Dec 2013; [Al-Jazeera](#), 14 Dec; [UN News Centre](#), 13 Dec 2013.

Ban spoke to the UN Security Council on Monday, 16 Dec, and there he said:

This new and broader knowledge should be of deep concern to all of us. Any use of chemical weapons, by anyone, under any circumstances, is a grave violation of the 1925 Protocol and other relevant rules of customary international law. The use of chemical weapons in Syria was a deplorable offense against the universal values of humankind.

Those responsible must be held accountable. The Security Council has said repeatedly that the use of weapons of mass destruction is a serious threat to international [peace] and security, and thus the Council has a primary role in bringing perpetrators to justice.

....

[About Geneva2, which begins 22 Jan 2014:]

We hope for gestures of good will before the conference, to build confidence and diminish the suffering of the Syrian people. These could include a cease-fire or at least a lowering of the levels of violence; the granting of unimpeded humanitarian access; the release of prisoners and detainees, especially women and children; and the lifting



of various sieges.

Ban Ki-moon, "Secretary-General's Remarks on the Final Report of the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," [UN/OPCW](#), 16 Dec 2013. Also at [UN](#).

This Report on the use of chemical weapons in Syria was a minor item in the news on 12-14 Dec, and then quickly disappeared from the news. One reason chemical weapons continue to be used is that nations lack the persistence to prosecute crimes for the use of chemical weapons. In his speeches on 13 Dec and 16 Dec, Ban called for a cease fire in Syria. That call for a ceasefire was totally ignored by the Syrian government, rebels, jihadists, and Al-Qaeda. In fact, on 15 Dec, the Syrian government began air bombardment of Aleppo, which killed 471 civilians up to 29 Dec. [SOHR](#)

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## History During 14-31 Dec 2013

### 14-16 Dec 2013

No significant news about chemical weapons during 14-16 Dec 2013.

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### 17-18 Dec 2013

The Executive Council of OPCW met on 17 Dec and considered a plan to destroy the chemical weapons in Syria. The OPCW news article says:

As requested by the OPCW Executive Council, Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü yesterday [17 Dec] submitted to the Council a plan for destroying the Syrian Arab Republic's chemical weapons outside of the country. The plan aims to meet a deadline set by the Council to destroy Syria's priority chemicals by 31 March 2014 and other mostly commodity chemicals by 30 June 2014.

In his opening [statement](#) [PDF 23 KB] at the Council meeting, the Director-General confirmed that "the major elements of a transportation and destruction plan are in place" and that the mission in Syria "is making progress against heavy odds," including a "massive procurement effort" that has gone into the collection and delivery to Syria of materials and equipment. He credited OPCW States Parties for offering transport, destruction facilities and other material assistance, and for making important financial contributions to the Special Trust Fund.

The Director-General cautioned that time schedules have been disrupted by a combination of security concerns, clearance procedures in international transit, and even inclement weather conditions. He said the possibility of some delays cannot be discounted but that the OPCW-UN Joint Mission is working intensively to commence removal and transportation operations, beginning with the removal of the priority chemicals from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic at the turn of the year.

"It would have been difficult a month ago to predict the availability of the assets that are now in place or will soon be," he concluded in his statement. "The resolve and commitment of our States Parties have created the conditions in which we can feel confident in implementing the far reaching decisions of the Executive Council and the Security Council of the United Nations."

[OPCW](#) news article, 18 Dec 2013.

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### **Futile United Nations Resolutions**

On 18 Dec, the United Nations General Assembly approved Resolution/68/182 condemning Assad's government in Syria. A total of 187 nations voted on the resolution, 68% in favor, with 13 nations opposed, and 47 nations abstaining. The resolution was drafted by Saudi Arabia. [Associated Press](#); [Reuters](#), both on 18 Dec 2013. Note that this resolution is *not* legally binding and is basically a meaningless gesture.

After Assad's military had several days of airstrikes on civilian areas in Aleppo, the USA introduced a resolution at the United Nations Security Council that condemned these airstrikes. Russia objected to the resolution, and the USA withdrew its resolution. [Reuters](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); [Washington Post](#); all on 19 Dec 2013.

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**19 Dec 2013**

### **Jihadists target secular opposition to Assad**

On 19 Dec, the Associated Press reports that jihadists are targeting secular opposition to Assad:

Hardline Islamic rebels are casting a dark shadow over parts of the country where they have wrested power. Abductions of moderate religious figures, humanitarian workers, human rights defenders, journalists and activists have increased since the spring, according to more than dozen activists and officials from human rights organizations interviewed by The Associated Press.

....

The abductions and the flight they have sparked are deeply hurting the ranks of media activists who emerged at the start of the uprising and have risked their lives to chronicle all aspects of the war. Their video footage uploaded to the Internet has been crucial in understanding the scale of the conflict, which has killed over 120,000 and driven more than 7 million from their homes since it began.

Many of them have now become openly critical of jihadi extremists, documenting their abuses — and turning themselves into targets.

In rebel-held areas, hardline rebels frequently storm activist media centers, smashing and confiscating equipment, and in some cases, beating or abducting workers. Activists

now fear even carrying cameras. Others have gone underground, taking on new fake names. Others refrain from reporting information that could anger the fighters.

That means even less information is emerging from Syria, already the world's most dangerous country for journalists, with some 30 foreign and Syrian journalists missing and 55 killed in the conflict.

"It's more and more difficult to know what's going on in the north, and that's what [the al-Qaida-linked Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant] (ISIL) wants," said Soazig Dollet, of Reporters Without Borders.

Diaa Hadid And Bassem Mroue, "Syria Militants Go After Opposition Activists," [Associated Press](#), 13:12 EST, 19 Dec 2013.

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### 15-23 Dec 2013

#### Planned Removal of Chemical Weapons from Syria

Russia delivered vehicles to Syria, for use in transporting chemical weapons from warehouses to the port in Latakia, Syria. Russian sources report 25 armored trucks and 50 ordinary trucks were sent during 18-20 Dec. Note that on [11 Nov](#), Western Europe and the USA refused to provide armored trucks to the Syrian government, because those trucks could be later used against rebels.

- "Russian Trucks for Chemical Disarmament Arrive in Syria," [RIA-Novosti](#), 18 Dec 2013;
- "Russia Delivers Chemical Disarmament Gear to Syria," [RIA-Novosti](#), 23 Dec 2013;
- "Russia sends armoured trucks to Syria to transport chemical arms," [Reuters](#), 09:39 GMT, 23 Dec 2013;
- "Russia flies lorries to Syria to move chemical weapons," [BBC](#), 23 Dec 2013;
- "Russia sends trucks for Syria arms removal," [Al-Jazeera](#), 23 Dec 2013;
- "Russia aids transport of Syria chemical arms," [Al-Arabiya](#), 23 Dec 2013;
- "Russia sends first 10 planes to Syria to help with chemical stockpile removal," [Al-Bawaba](#), 09:29 GMT, 19 Dec 2013.

Danish and Norwegian cargo ships will transport the weapons from Latakia to a port in Italy, where they will be transferred to a U.S. ship for destruction at sea.

- "Italy to provide port for Syrian chemical weapons transfer," [Reuters](#), 15 Dec 2013;
- [Al-Jazeera](#), 15 Dec 2013.

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#### Muslim Clerics

On 15 Dec, a prominent Shiite cleric in Iran issued a fatwa allowing Shiites to fight for Assad in Syria. The Associated Press reports:

A leading Shiite Muslim cleric widely followed by Iraqi militants has issued the first

public religious edict permitting Shiites to fight in Syria's civil war alongside President Bashar Assad's forces.

The fatwa by Iran-based Grand Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri, one of the mentors of radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, comes as thousands of Shiite fighters mostly from Iraq and Lebanon play a major role in the battles.

The call likely will increase the sectarian tones of the war, which pits overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim rebels against members of Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. The situation has worsened with the influx of thousands of Shiite and Sunni foreign fighters.

....

Asked by a follower whether it is legitimate to travel to Syria to fight, al-Haeri replied: "The battle in Syria is not for the defense of the shrine of Sayida Zeinab but it is a battle of infidels against Islam and Islam should be defended."

"Fighting in Syria is legitimate and those who die are martyrs," al-Haeri said in comments posted on his official website. An official at his office confirmed that the comments are authentic.

Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Prominent Shiite Cleric Backs Fighting In Syria," [Associated Press](#), 15 Dec 2013.

See also: [Arab News](#), 16 Dec; [Gulf News](#), 15 Dec; [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), 16 Dec 2013.

On 24 Dec, some good news from Muslim clerics, reported by *The Daily Star* in Lebanon: Seven leading organizations representing Muslim scholars have condemned hard-line jihadists from the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) for committing human rights abuses and acting against the interest of Syria's popular uprising.

In a statement circulated over the weekend on pro-opposition websites, the organizations accused ISIS militants of persecuting other rebel units, civilian activists and others who do not share their extremist views.

The scholars said ISIS was responsible for spreading "strife" and said the militants had no right to act like they represented the "state" that appears in the title of their organization.

"They have blocked relief and religious propagation activities on the grounds that they doubt the policy [of a given group], or accuse it of being foreign agents," the religious groups complained.

"Muslim scholars condemn ISIS over violations," [Daily Star](#), 24 Dec 2013.  
Reprinted in [Al-Bawaba](#).

On 15 Dec 2013, a civil war in South Sudan began. After reports of mass graves and suspicions of genocide, on 24 Dec the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved increasing its peacekeeping force in South Sudan from 6800 to 13800 soldiers and police. On 27 Dec, the government of South Sudan offered a ceasefire, but the rebels did *not* respond. On 1 Jan 2014, war was continuing. Fighting in South Sudan will distract the United Nations — and divert resources — from the civil war in Syria.

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### 25-26 Dec 2013

No significant news about Syrian chemical weapons.

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### Deadline to be missed

OPCW established a deadline of 31 Dec 2013 for the removal of the most dangerous chemicals from Syria. It is now clear that deadline will be missed. In fact, the removal of chemicals from Syria has not yet begun. TASS News Agency in Russia said:

Russia has voiced its readiness to provide naval ships to escort the dangerous cargo. Shortly, components of Syrian chemical weapons must be brought to the seaport of Latakia [in Syria] where they will be loaded aboard Dutch and Norwegian container vessels for subsequent destruction at sea. All in all, more than 1,000 tons of chemicals will be destroyed. Mustard gas, sarin gas components, elements of XV-gases, considered the most dangerous, are to be removed first.

Initially, it was planned to take these chemicals away by December 31, but it is obvious now that this plan fails. However, experts say the situation must not be dramatized. Under decisions of the UN Security Council and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, all stocks of Syrian chemical weapons must be destroyed by June 30, 2014. Nobody questions this final timeframe, while the timing of intermediate stages may be changed in accordance with the situation.

At present, plans are to remove and load the bulk of chemical weapons on ships in January. From the Syrian coast they would be moved to an Italian port and re-loaded aboard the US Cape Ray ship which has equipment necessary for initial treatment of poisonous substances. This ship will reach the Mediterranean in the second part of January. Great Britain has also expressed its readiness to destroy part of chemical weapons. Russia and China are ready to ensure the safety of their loading onto a container vessel and escort these ships within Syria's territorial waters.

"Experts discuss how to take chemical weapons out of Syria safely," [TASS](#), 27 Dec 2013.

The Associated Press reported:

A top Russian diplomat says the Dec. 31 deadline for removing the most toxic of Syria's chemical weapons won't be met.

According to a timeline agreed upon earlier, the most toxic chemicals were to have been removed by the end of the year.

But Ahmet Uzumcu, head of the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons, had earlier indicated delays were possible due to heavy fighting.

On Friday [27 Dec], after a meeting of Russian, U.S. and other experts on Syrian chemical weapons, the Foreign Ministry's disarmament department head, Mikhail Ulyanov, was quoted as telling the Interfax news agency "We of course won't succeed by Dec. 31."

He said it was unclear when the work might begin and that it probably wouldn't be announced in advance due to concerns of rebel interference.

"Russia: Syria Weapons Deadline Won't Be Met," [Associated Press](#), 10:43 EST, 27 Dec 2013.

Voice of Russia reported:

Activities on the removal of the most hazardous chemicals from Syria may last longer than expected, Franz Krawinkler, the OPCW's logistics head, has said.

"Probably, there will be a delay for various external reasons, including weather. Some of the materials needed for the transportation of chemicals can't be delivered on time," Krawinkler stated in an interview to the Austrian ORF television and radio company.

The expert added that an ever-changing situation in Syrian battlefields also leads to delays.

According to a previously approved OPCW plan, the most hazardous chemicals are to be taken away from Syria by December 31, 2013.

Yesterday, Mikhail Ulyanov, the head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department of Security Affairs and Disarmament, also mentioned the possibility of a delay.

"By December 31, which is real soon, we're certainly not going to make it. Nobody knows when we start the removal of chemicals but I think I won't be announcing it in advance in order not to tip off militants willing to wreck an operation," he stated.

"Syrian chemicals removal may be delayed — OPCW," [Voice of Russia](#), 28 Dec 2013.

On 28 Dec, the United Nations issued a statement:

Recognizing the extraordinary character of the situation, the United Nations Security Council and OPCW Executive Council established ambitious benchmarks and timelines for the removal and elimination of Syrian chemical weapons programme by the end of June 2014. The first intermediate milestone established under the Executive Council decision (EC-M-34/DEC.1) relates to the 31 December 2013 date for the removal of the most critical chemical weapons material from the country for destruction. The OPCW-UN Joint Mission's efforts have focused on mobilizing action to allow the Syrian Arab Republic to meet these timelines.

Preparations continue in readiness for the transport of most of the critical chemical

material from the Syrian Arab Republic for outside destruction. However, at this stage, transportation of the most critical chemical material before 31 December is unlikely.

A number of external factors have impacted upon timelines, not least the continuing volatility in overall security conditions, which have constrained planned movements. The Syrian Arab Republic has also indicated its specific requirements, which it deems critical to the package and transport of chemical weapons material. A wide-scale procurement effort by individual Member States has been facilitated by the OPCW-UN Joint Mission to source, collect and deliver various packaging and transport materials requested by the Syrian Arab Republic. Logistical challenges coupled with inclement weather have contributed to this delay.

Preparations are well advanced in regards to the supply of materials and transport equipment, as well as the provision for the maritime transport and destruction capabilities, in order to commence removal and transport of most the critical chemical material from Syrian territory as soon as possible.

A number of Member States have contributed positively to the Syrian Arab Republic's request for assistance. It remains the ultimate responsibility of the Syrian Arab Republic to ensure the safe packaging, transport, and removal of chemical weapons material and to facilitate the procedures for the expeditious and verifiable destruction of its remaining chemical weapons.

The OPCW-UN Joint Mission welcomes the important milestones which have been achieved towards the elimination of the Syrian Arab Republic's chemical weapons programme. The OPCW-UN Joint Mission further notes the importance of maintaining positive momentum. The Syrian Arab Republic needs to intensify its efforts to ensure that its international obligations and commitment are met, including under the Chemical Weapons Convention and in fulfilment of UN Security Council Resolution 2118 and the relevant decisions of the OPCW Executive Council.

"Statement from OPCW-UN Joint Mission," [OPCW/UN](#), 28 Dec 2013.

See also [Al-Arabiya](#), [Al-Bawaba](#), both on 28 Dec 2013. [Al-Jazeera](#), 29 Dec 2013; [NY Times](#), 30 Dec 2013.

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### 29-30 Dec 2013

Nothing significant to report.

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### 31 Dec 2013 December 2013 death toll in Syria

On 31 Dec 2013, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that 130,433 people had died in the Syrian civil war from 18 March 2011 up to 30 Dec 2013. [Reuters](#), 31 Dec 2013; [SOHR](#), 1 Jan 2014.

Approximately 4598 people died in Syria during December 2013, while diplomats *talked* about the possibility of a Geneva2 conference in January 2014.

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## Conclusion

I am surprised that no one in Syria has shot at the OPCW personnel, and no one has attempted to kidnap the OPCW personnel. The three Red Cross workers who were kidnapped in Syria on 13 Oct are still missing and forgotten. (See above, for 13-14 Oct, 18 Oct, 8 Nov.) The dozen nuns who were kidnapped in Syria on [2 Dec](#) are also still missing and forgotten.

The work of OPCW inside Syria has progressed extraordinarily well. But it is no surprise that the 31 Dec deadline was missed for removal of the most dangerous chemical weapons from Syria. The continuing civil war in Syria makes transport of chemical weapons by land dangerous, because jihadists or Al-Qaeda could capture the weapons.

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## Why Peace Negotiations Futile

My previous [essay](#) explains why I believe peace negotiations are futile with the current conditions in Syria. The following information continues this history of frustrated negotiations:

*Al-Arabiya* reported on 6 Oct 2013:

U.N. Arab League peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi on Sunday urged all parties of the Syrian conflict to engage in peace talks "without pre-conditions," adding that he hoped negotiations could take place in Geneva by mid-November.

....

The opposition has said it will not negotiate unless President Bashar al-Assad leaves office, but Brahimi said the condition would have to be set aside.

"We are going to Geneva without preconditions. Mr. Bashar al-Assad cannot say that he does not want to negotiate with 'X' or 'Y' and it's the same thing for the opposition," Brahimi said.

"Syria envoy Brahimi calls for late-Nov. talks 'without pre-conditions'," [Al-Arabiya](#), 15:17 GMT, 6 Oct 2013.

The day after Brahimi's invitation, the main Syrian opposition group favored by the USA and Western Europe demanded *three* preconditions for their attending the peace conference:

The head of the Syrian National Coalition Monday [7 Oct] listed conditions that need to be "guaranteed" in order for the main opposition group to participate in the proposed Geneva II conference aimed at solving the 30-month Syrian conflict.

- Iran must not participate as "mediator" in the conference.
- "We ask Hezbollah to leave Syria."



- there will be "no dialogue with criminal Assad regime," re-iterating his group's redundant appeal for embattled President Assad to cede power for any political solution to be negotiated.

"Syrian opposition sets conditions for Geneva II," [Al-Arabiya](#), 16:26 GMT, 7 Oct 2013.  
(Formatting as list added by Standler.)

The logical way to negotiate an end to the dispute is to have *all* of the relevant parties in one room. But that is *not the only* way. I can envision Assad's government and its supporters (e.g., Russia, Iran) in one room, and delegates from most of the rebels and their supporters (e.g., USA, Qatar, Saudi Arabia) in a second room, while Brahimi shuttles between rooms. Having representatives of foreign meddlers (e.g., Russia, Iran, USA, Qatar, Saudi Arabia) at a peace conference will make negotiations more difficult, because there will be more opinions and more demands.

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On Sunday, 13 Oct 2013, the Syrian National Council — one of the groups in the Syrian National Coalition — announced they would *not* attend the Geneva2 negotiations:

A major Syrian opposition group that has gained international recognition would not participate in the Moscow-backed Geneva-2 peace conference on Syria, the group's leader told RIA Novosti on Sunday [13 Oct].

"Nothing useful will come out for Syrians from attending the meeting," George Sabra of the Syrian National Council said.

"The decision [not to participate] was made yesterday [12 Oct] by the general secretariat [of the council]," Sabra said by telephone from France.

....

Sabra said his group bailed out due to the lackluster international response to the consequences of the Syrian war, among which he listed mass slaughter of civilians, food shortage and, recently, the use of chemical weapons.

....

Sabra said the Syrian National Council will quit the Syrian National Coalition in case the latter goes through with its plan to participate in Geneva-2.

"Leading Syrian Opposition Group Bails Out on Geneva-2 Talks," [RIA-Novosti](#), 13 Oct 2013.

Agence France-Presse reported:

"The Syrian National Council, which is the biggest bloc in the Coalition, has taken the firm decision... not to go to Geneva, under the present circumstances (on the ground)," Council president George Sabra, told AFP.

....

The Syrian National Council has long said it will not negotiate until President Bashar al-Assad's regime is toppled.

[France24](#) 12:36 Paris time, 13 Oct 2013.

See also [Al-Jazeera](#) and [Al-Arabiya](#).

Note that the Council not only refuses to attend Geneva2, but also the Council threatens to resign from the Coalition if the Coalition attends Geneva2. In this way, the Council attempts to make a decision for the entire Coalition. This conduct is from the so-called *democracy* activists in Syria!

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An old proverb says: "The absent are always in the wrong". One should not refuse to attend a meeting and then complain about the result of that meeting.

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On 14 Oct, Kerry met with UN Special Representative Brahimi in London. After the meeting, Kerry said:

Special Representative Brahimi and I agree, as do many others, that there is no military solution in Syria, and we believe it is urgent to set a date, convene the conference, and work towards a new Syria.

We also, expressing my own point of view — because [Brahimi]'s the negotiator and it's not his point of view to say this — but we believe that President Assad has lost the legitimacy necessary to be able to be a cohesive force, that could bring people together, and that it is clear that in implementing Geneva 1, which is the only purpose for having the Geneva conference now, there has to be a transition government. There has to be a new governing entity in Syria in order to permit the possibility of peace.

This will require all the parties to come together in good faith. . . . .

[State Dept.](#), 14 Oct 2013.

Kerry again said Assad "has lost the legitimacy to be able to be a cohesive force that could bring people together." As documented in my previous essay, U.S. Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry have been saying this since June 2011. The fact is that Assad has outlasted Hillary Clinton, and Assad is continuing to do a good job of leading his military in a battle against rebels. I believe that Assad's government is much preferable to a government led by jihadists and terrorists. I worry that if a strong leader like Assad is removed, the "good" rebels will be unable to either defeat or control the jihadists.

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On 14 Oct, the Russian Foreign Minister, Lavrov, accused the West of failing to exert influence to force the rebels in Syria to attend the Geneva2 conference. RIA-Novosti reported:

Russia's foreign minister on Monday [14 Oct] said a key Syrian opposition group's refusal to take part in the Moscow-backed Geneva-2 peace conference on Syria indicates that the West has failed to deliver on its promises.

. . . . .

Lavrov said that, despite repeated reassurances from "our American partners" that they would mobilize all the diverse elements of the Syrian opposition to attend the conference "under the umbrella of the National Coalition," there have been no results.

In contrast to what he called the West's lack of influence over the Syrian opposition groups, Lavrov stressed that Russia exerts influence over the Syrian government, which delivers "real results."

"West Failing to Deliver on Syria Deals with Russia — FM Lavrov," [RIA-Novosti](#), 14 Oct 2013.

My comment is that Lavrov has the easy part: he only needs to convince Assad, and Lavrov is willing to use threats (i.e., "exerts influence") to convince Assad. In contrast, the West has to convince dozens of rebel groups, some of which are jihadists or Al-Qaeda-affiliated who openly *hate* Western Civilization.

Russia is a large supplier of munitions to Syria, and Russia can threaten to withdraw that support. In contrast, the USA supplies a limited amount of small arms to the "good" rebels during the past few months, support which is insufficient for a credible threat of withdrawal, even if the USA were willing to make such a threat. The principal suppliers of the rebels (e.g., Qatar and Saudi Arabia) are *not* part of the West and are beyond the control of the USA/Europe. In summary, Lavrov is blaming the West for not meddling more in the Syrian internal affairs, thereby gaining greater influence with the rebels.

Even if *all* of the parties somehow attend the Geneva2 conference, agreement on the future government seems impossible: Assad wants to remain in power, and the rebels demand that Assad resign.

And after Assad is removed, peace will not come to Syria, because the jihadists and Al-Qaeda terrorists will continue to fight the "good" rebels — battles that are already occurring in Syria. It is easy to envision Syria degenerating into the anarchy of Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya.

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On 17 Oct, the Geneva2 negotiations were finally scheduled for 23-24 Nov 2013:

An international peace conference on Syria backed by Russia and the United States will take place on November 23-24, a senior Syrian governmental official said Thursday [17 Oct].

The Geneva-2 conference will proceed despite leading Syrian opposition groups' continuing reluctance to participate, Deputy Prime Minister Qadri Jamil said at a press conference in Moscow.

The prospects for the conference have seemingly dimmed in recent weeks, with representatives of Syria's increasingly fractured opposition voicing reluctance to attend.

The list included representatives of the main insurgent groups on the ground such as the Islamist al-Nusra Front and the moderate Free Syrian Army, as well as the Syrian

National Council, the core of the opposition's main political body, the internationally recognized Syrian National Coalition.

However, Jamil said the conference will proceed regardless of a possible boycott by the rebels.

"The Syrian National Council's refusal to participate in the Geneva-2 would not affect the timeframe and format of the conference," he said. "They will likely change their decision," Jamil added.

He did not specify the reasons for his optimism, but a UN diplomat earlier told RIA Novosti on condition of anonymity that the United Nations was working to convince the Syrian National Council to attend Geneva-2.

[RIA-Novosti](#), 17 Oct 2013.

See also [Al-Arabiya](#).

Reuters adds more detail:

Asked to confirm the dates, [Jamil] told Reuters: "Yes, this is what (U.N. Secretary General) Ban Ki-moon is saying, not me."

....

[Jamil said:] "Geneva is a way out for everyone: the Americans, Russia, the Syrian regime and the opposition. Whoever realises this first will benefit. Whoever does not realise it will find himself overboard, outside the political process."

[Reuters](#), 10:15 BST, 17 Oct 2013.

Later on 17 Oct, the Associated Press added an explanation for the delays in scheduling Geneva2:

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Wednesday [16 Oct] that efforts are intensifying to try to hold the Geneva meeting in mid-November. Ban did not provide specific dates, and it's not clear whether the schedule provided by Jamil has been agreed to by any other parties.

The talks have been put off repeatedly, in part because of fundamental disagreements over the fate of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The Western-backed Syrian National Coalition, the main alliance of political opposition groups, has said it will only negotiate if it is agreed from the start that Assad will leave power at the end of a transition period. Many rebel fighters inside Syria flatly reject negotiating with Assad's regime.

The regime has rejected such a demand, saying Assad will stay at least until the end of his term in mid-2014, and he will decide then whether to seek re-election. The regime has said it refuses to negotiate with the armed opposition.

The United States and Russia have been trying to bring the Damascus government and

Syria's divided opposition to negotiations in Geneva for months, but the meeting has been repeatedly delayed. It remains unclear if either side is really willing to negotiate while Syria's civil war, now in its third year, remains deadlocked.

Bassem Mroue, "STATE TV: TOP SYRIAN ARMY GENERAL KILLED IN BATTLE," [Associated Press](#), 13:28 EDT, 17 Oct 2013.

Note that it for the host(s) of the meeting (i.e., Ban Ki-moon and Brahimi) to announce the dates, not for a guest. It is *not* yet certain that Geneva2 will occur in Nov 2013. [Reuters](#), 17:49 BST, 17 Oct 2013.

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On 19 Oct, Brahimi began a trip to establish support for the Geneva2 negotiations. Brahimi began in Egypt with meetings at the Arab League headquarters, and then traveled to Iraq, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Reuters reported on 20 Oct:

Also unclear is who, if anyone, would attend [Geneva2] from Syria's divided opposition coalition.

Najib Ghadbian, the opposition coalition's U.S. representative, said an important component of the coalition had decided against taking part, but other members of the umbrella group could still decide to go, assuming Assad was not there.

Assad's government has said it would not consider any deal that required the president to step down.

Brahimi, who earlier said there would be no preconditions to attending the peace talks, said on Sunday the opposition was facing "many problems".

"A conference will not be convened without a convincing opposition that represents an important part of Syria's opposition population," Brahimi said.

[Reuters](#), 13:18 BST, 20 Oct 2013.

See also [France24](#), [Al-Arabiya](#), 20 Oct 2013.

The Syrian National Coalition announced it was meeting on 1-2 Nov to decide whether to attend Geneva2. Back on 13 Oct, the Syrian National Council, one of the main groups in the Coalition, announced it would *not* attend Geneva2.

Reflecting the confusion over Geneva2, the morning of 20 Oct the chief of the Arab League said that Geneva2 had been scheduled for 23-24 Nov, while Brahimi — who was standing next to the chief at the press conference on 20 Oct — denied that Geneva2 had been scheduled. "Confusion over long-delayed Syria conference," [Associated Press](#), 16:00 EDT, 20 Oct 2013; "Doubts over when Syria peace conference to be scheduled," [Al-Arabiya](#), 12:28 GMT, 20 Oct 2013.

The problem seems to be that Brahimi has *two* masters: Brahimi is the envoy to Syria for both the Arab League and the United Nations. But the United Nations is scheduling Geneva2, *not* the Arab League.

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### London 11 meeting on 22 Oct 2013

In February 2012, Hillary Clinton helped create the "Friends of the Syrian People", a group of nations who opposed Assad as the lawful ruler of Syria. The core of the Friends of Syria were eleven nations: Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE, UK, and the USA. These eleven nations became known as the London 11, after a conference in London on 22 June 2013.

The London 11 again met in London on 22 Oct 2013 to persuade the moderate Syrian opposition to attend Geneva2. The United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, William Hague, opened the conference with a speech:

Mr Hague said the opposition, elements of which are loathe to negotiate with Assad's government, should attend the Geneva talks despite president [Assad]'s scornful approach. "If they are not part of a peace process in Syria then all the Syrian people have got left is to choose between Assad on the one hand and extremists," he said.

"The longer this conflict goes on the more sectarian it becomes and the more extremists are able to take hold and that is why we are making this renewed effort to get a Geneva peace process going."

"London conference on Syria opens with warning neither side can win," [The Telegraph](#), 10:33 BST, 22 Oct 2013.

See also [BBC](#).

What impresses me in reading many news stories about this London 11 conference is that the focus is on what Hague and Kerry said, *not* what the Syrian rebels said — and *not* what the Syrian people want. Indeed, it was difficult to learn who from Syria is attending this conference. *Only one* rebel group attended the London 11 conference: the Syrian National Coalition.

Kerry, speaking at a press conference after the London 11 conference, was very clear that the Syrian National Coalition would "make their own decisions" whether to attend Geneva2. However, Kerry declared that the Syrian National Coalition was "the legitimate representative of the Syrian people" — without any vote by the Syrian people. [State Dept.](#) See also the press release by the UK [Foreign Office](#).

The official [communiqué](#) of the London 11 meeting on 22 Oct is available in Microsoft Word format. I used Nisus Writer to convert the Microsoft Word document to Adobe PDF format and posted a printable PDF version at my [website](#).

Item 2 of the London 11 Final Communiqué says: "We agree that when the [Transitional Governing Body] is established, Assad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no role in Syria." I am appalled. These words have no place in a diplomatic document. And this surely discourages Assad from attending Geneva2, although he is an essential party there.

Items 2, 3 and 9 say: "There must be accountability for acts committed during the present conflict. .... The regime bears the responsibility for the bloody conflict.... .... All the

evidence on the 21 August attack points clearly to regime culpability, ...." That is essentially an indictment of Assad as a war criminal. Again, these words are not helpful in having Assad's participation in negotiations.

Reuters reported on the London11 conference:

Plans for talks to end the fighting in Syria were in jeopardy on Tuesday [22 Oct] after the opposition refused to attend unless President Bashar al-Assad is forced from power and a furious Saudi Arabia made clear it would no longer co-operate with the United States over the civil war.

Western nations and their Middle Eastern allies pressed Syria's fractured opposition to join the proposed peace talks, although Assad has indicated he will not bow to opposition demands that he should step down as a pre-condition.

"Syria peace talks plans in jeopardy after opposition, Saudi moves," [Reuters](#), 16:47 BST, 22 Oct 2013.

After the conference, the Associated Press reported:

Al-Jarba [president of Syrian National Coalition (SNC)] told reporters that the coalition does not want to negotiate with Assad directly or agree to negotiations without a set timetable. He also said he wanted only the SNC at the table to represent opposition — not extremist groups who have joined against Assad. And he objected to Iran's participation.

The diplomats also released a communique outlining goals for the negotiations' outcome. They include a mandatory requirement that Assad and his close aides will have no role in a new Syrian government.

....

Moderate groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, a loose coalition of rebel brigades, are in disarray. Last week, 65 rebel groups, including many linked to the FSA, announced they would not recognize the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition in what was widely seen as a rebuke to the West for failing to send more support.

[Associated Press](#), 14:08 EDT, 22 Oct 2013.

Later, the Associated Press reported:

A meeting Tuesday between the Syrian opposition and 11 of its foreign supporters, including the U.S., provided a venue for Washington to press its case. But the coalition, which has been deeply frustrated by what it sees as the West's paltry aid for the rebellion, did not bend. Instead, it presented a list of demands that made the already-slim chances of the peace talks going ahead look bleak at best.

....

One senior coalition member, Ahmad Ramadan, said the U.S is pushing the coalition to drop its preconditions and go to Geneva to present its "demands, conditions and

visions there," and that Washington has promised its support.

"We consider that this suggestion does not carry any guarantees with enough credibility," he said, adding that U.S. assurances ring hollow after the Obama administration failed to carry out a military attack against Assad following the Aug. 21 chemical attack.

The issue of [Assad]'s fate — and what role he should have in a transitional period — has been a key sticking point.

"Syria opposition under pressure to negotiate," [Associated Press](#), 17:36 EDT, 22 Oct 2013. Another copy at [Denver Post](#).

The following day, 23 Oct, the Russian Foreign Ministry criticized London 11 for three points.

1. Item 17 of the Communiqué says "We are prepared as a group to pursue all possible options to secure compliance." The Russian Foreign Ministry says "This is a poorly hidden threat to return to the use of military force, which is absolutely unacceptable."
2. Item 16 says "... the Syrian National Coalition should be the heart and lead, as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people." That disenfranchises Assad's government, the citizens of Syria, and all of the other rebel groups.
3. Item 2 says "Assad and his close associates ... will have no role in Syria." The Russian Foreign Ministry says this "again sets regime change in Damascus as the key task".

The Russian Foreign Ministry said that the London 11 conference "was apparently conceived as an attempt to predetermine the results of Geneva-2".

Russia sees Assad as the legitimate ruler of Syria (Assad was elected in the years 2000 and 2007 for seven-year terms) and the discussion should be about the rebels. The London 11 sees the Syrian National Coalition as the *only* "legitimate representative of the Syrian people" and the London 11 has concluded that Assad *must* resign.

"Friends of Syria report: hidden threats to return to military scenario — Lukashovich," [Voice of Russia](#), 23 Oct 2013 and "Russia Criticizes Results of London Diplomatic Meeting on Syria," [RIA-Novosti](#), 23 Oct 2013.

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Con Coughlin, defense editor of *The Telegraph*, a newspaper in England, pointed out the folly of demanding that Assad have no part in a transitional government (or future government) in Syria.

.... Consequently, the attempt to punish Assad for killing his own people [with chemical weapons on 21 Aug] mutated into a UN-led undertaking to dismantle Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons. In short, Assad was allowed to escape scot-free.

The effects of Assad's unexpected reprieve are today clearly visible in the new-found



swagger that is to be found in the Syrian tyrant's step. For, far from being cowed by the events of late August, he exudes an aura of self-confidence that flies in the face of the conclusion reached at yesterday's [22 Oct] summit in London of Western and Arab powers — including members of the Syrian opposition — that "Assad will play no role in the future government of Syria".

....

And given that there is now little prospect of the West taking military action in Syria, reviving the moribund Geneva peace talks is the only viable option Western policymakers have left for ending the violence.

But if Mr Hague and the other members of the "Friends of Syria" group are serious about negotiating a deal, excluding Assad from any future settlement is not necessarily the best way to go about it — not least because it ignores the fact that, as things stand, he is winning the war.

....

Surely, given the unwitting role the West has played in enhancing Assad's survival prospects, a more realistic approach would be for Western leaders to accept that Assad has the upper hand and act accordingly.

Unpalatable as it might seem after so much blood has been spilt, the stark truth is that, so far as the West's long-term interests are concerned, it would be better to have a stable Syria with Assad in charge than have the country descend into a lawless, ungovernable state such as Libya where Islamist terror cells flourish with impunity.

Con Coughlin, "Syria: Like it or not, we'll have to talk to Bashar al-Assad," [The Telegraph](#), 22 Oct 2013.

See also Con Coughlin, "There won't be peace in Syria so long as Britain is backing the rebels," [The Telegraph](#), 22 Oct 2013.

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### my comments

We know what the foreign nations meddling in Syria want. The London 11 group made their desires clear on 22 Oct. Russia and Iran want Assad to continue to control the government of Syria.

We know Assad wants to continue as leader of Syria, at least until the end of his current term, which expires in mid-2014. We know some of what the Syrian National Coalition (moderate rebels) want, from what they said in the past and said again on 22 Oct: first and foremost they want Assad and his cronies to resign. The jihadists want to establish an Islamic state in Syria.

Notice that these leaders of groups are only concerned with their power and control of Syria. Assad wants to continue being president of Syria, even if it means more than 115,000 people

die. The leaders of the rebel groups and jihadist groups are engaged in an armed rebellion against Assad, to seize control of Syria. This struggle is *only* about power and control. If you think this bleak view is hyperbole, read the materials [above](#) about the failure of Assad and the rebels to allow delivery of food and humanitarian aid to suffering people in Syria.

These are all statements of *leaders* of groups of people. But what do the Syrian *citizens* want? We can not be certain, but more than two million of them voted with their feet by fleeing to adjacent nations — which is an escape from the continuing civil war. It would seem that the citizens want (1) an end to the civil war and then (2) a rebuilding of homes and communities destroyed by the civil war. If an election were to be held, there is a danger that the citizens of Syria would vote for anyone — including the jihadists — who promises to end the civil war.

*If* the Geneva2 meeting occurs, it will bring together *leaders* of groups of people, maybe including Assad's government and maybe including one group of moderate rebels. But such a meeting has little credibility, because no one will speak for the bulk of the *citizens* of Syria, and no one will speak for most of the rebels. And the jihadists will *not* be invited to Geneva2, although their cooperation is essential to ending the civil war. However, it is certain that foreign meddlers will be well represented at Geneva2. I have not seen any commentary about this serious underinclusiveness of the proposed Geneva2 meeting.

Instead, everyone seems to focus on the intransigence of the parties — not only Assad, the rebels, and the jihadists, but also the foreign meddlers. It is not possible to satisfy *all* of the demands of the parties, because the parties want opposite things. This is a big problem facing Geneva2.

Anyone who has conducted negotiations between hostile parties know that the secret to a successful negotiation is that each party must have something to lose if the negotiations are unsuccessful. The Syrian people, obviously, have a lot to lose: their lives, their health, their property, .... But the leaders of the many rebel groups, as well as Assad, seem content to continue to fight a civil war indefinitely.

With Geneva2 destined to fail for multiple reasons, there is a temptation to allow an indefinite continuation of the Syrian civil war. Assad and the leaders of the numerous rebel groups perhaps deserve that. But the citizens of Syria — both the refugees in neighboring nations and the blighters remaining in Syria — deserve better. In a democracy, we say that everyone gets what the majority deserved. But with no one speaking for the Syrian people, the Syrian citizens currently have no leader looking out for the desires and goals of the Syrian people.

In addition to the underinclusiveness of the proposed Geneva2 negotiations, there is another serious problem. The London 11 are pushing Geneva2 to implement the plan announced at the first Geneva conference, in June 2012. The problem — which everyone is ignoring — is that *no one* from Syria — neither Assad's government nor rebels nor citizens — were represented at the first Geneva conference. This means that the foreign meddlers have concocted a solution that they seek to impose on Syria, without any input from people in Syria. This is very *undemocratic* and ought to be rejected.

Finally, there is the issue that the London 11, and especially the USA, have been saying that Assad must *not* participate in any transitional or future government in Syria. Foreign meddlers, including the United Nations, should not impose a leader on Syria. The Syrian people should choose their own leader, without meddling by foreign nations. The world makes this problem more difficult by continuing to meddle by supplying munitions to various rebels groups and also to Assad's government. *If* the United Nations were effective, it could impose and enforce an arms embargo, but that will not happen, because Russia will veto such a proposal in the Security Council.

[Above](#), I quote Con Coughlin's opinion that it is preferable that Assad continue to lead Syria, compared to the alternative that jihadists/terrorists control most of Syria. I believe that the best solution is to continue Assad's government, end the civil war between the moderate rebels and the Assad government, merge the moderate rebels (including deserters from the Syrian military) into the Syrian military, have a unified fight against the jihadists, and hold the regularly scheduled elections in Syria in June 2014. This solution would contain the jihadists inside Syria. Like it or not, Assad is the strongest and most experienced leader in Syria. And Syria really needs a strong leader now. However, this solution is a fantasy that is *not* going to happen. Neither the moderate rebels nor Assad can tolerate each other, even though they have common interests in preserving Syria and defeating jihadists. Furthermore, this solution is *not* likely to occur, because of more than two years of hatred and distrust between the rebels and the Syrian military.

Nevertheless, *before* the London 11 decides that Assad has no future in Syria, the London 11 needs to find a better leader than Assad. Before abandoning what one has, make sure one has something better!

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### **Replacing Bashar Assad? absence of a strong alternative leader**

Hafez al-Assad was President of Syria from March 1971 until his death in June 2000. Hafez's son, Bashar, became President in 2000 and was reelected in 2007. As of Oct 2013, the Assad family has controlled Syria for 42 years. Because the legislature is weak in Syria, this means the Assad family is essentially alone in having experience in leading the Syrian government.

This is difficult for people in the USA to understand. In the USA, we have 50 governors, 100 U.S. Senators, and 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, many of whom could be a credible candidate for the presidency of the USA. The USA also has a shorter term of office — four years for president and a maximum of two terms, compared to seven years in Syria with no maximum — which assures the USA will have more turnover of politicians than Syria.

The Syrian National Council was formed on 23 Aug 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey. The initial members were nearly all expatriates of Syria, most of whom had been living in Turkey for many years.

On 31 Oct 2012, U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, criticized the Syrian National Council as a group of old expatriates who did *not* represent the current inhabitants of Syria. Clinton said:

So we are working very hard with many different elements from the opposition — yes, inside Syria as well as outside Syria. Some of you might remember I hosted a meeting in New York during the UN General Assembly. We facilitated the smuggling-out of a few representatives of the Syrian internal opposition in order for them to explain to the countries gathered why they must be at the table. This cannot be an opposition represented by people who have many good attributes but have, in many instances, not been inside Syria for 20, 30, or 40 years. There has to be a representation of those who are on the frontlines, fighting and dying today to obtain their freedom.

And there needs to be an opposition leadership structure that is dedicated to representing and protecting all Syrians. It is not a secret that many inside Syria are worried about what comes next. They have no love lost for the Assad regime, but they worry, rightly so, about the future. And so there needs to be an opposition that can speak to every segment and every geographic part of Syria. And we also need an opposition that will be on record strongly resisting the efforts by extremists to hijack the Syrian revolution. There are disturbing reports of extremists going into Syria and attempting to take over what has been a legitimate revolution against a repressive regime for their own purposes.

Hillary Clinton, "Remarks With Croatian President Ivo Josipovic After Their Meeting," [State Dept.](#), 31 Oct 2012.

In response to Clinton, the Syrian National Coalition was formed on 11 November 2012. The Syrian National Council has 22 of 63 seats (35%) in the Coalition, making the Council the largest group in the Coalition. The London 11 nations — plus Spain, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, et alia — recognize the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Unfortunately, the Coalition began to crumble in September 2013, with many rebel groups leaving the Coalition.

On 12 Oct 2013, Arnab Neil Sengupta, writing in *Al-Jazeera*, [mentioned](#) that the rebels lack a "Mandela-like unifying figure" who could end the disorganization of the rebels and attract consistent international support. This is, in part, the result of more than 40 years of domination of the Syrian government by the Assad family.

Note that the lack of experienced political leaders is *not unique* to Syria. This lack is a characteristic of many Muslim nations, which are now going through anarchy after deposing their long-serving (between 24 and 42 years) leader:

- Iraq, where Saddam Hussein ruled from July 1979 until April 2003.
- Tunisia, where president Ben Ali ruled from Nov 1987 until Jan 2011.
- Egypt, where Mubarak ruled from Oct 1981 until Feb 2011.
- Libya, where Gaddafi ruled from Sep 1969 until Aug 2011.

The lesson is that no one should be leader of a nation for more than approximately ten years.

Furthermore, to avoid tyrants, there should be three equal branches of government (executive, legislative, judiciary), each with the power to overrule the other two branches in some circumstances.

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### 27 Oct 2013

On 27 Oct, Al-Arabiya reports "22 mostly Islamist brigades" have rejected attending Geneva2:

Main Syrian rebel brigades have announced their opposition to an international peace conference on Syria if it does not result in President Bashar al-Assad's removal, piling pressure on the political opposition not to attend.

"Any solution will be totally rejected if it does not end Assad's rule with all of its military and security pillars and if it does not hold accountable all those who took part in the state terrorism," said the statement, dated Saturday [26 Oct] and signed by some of the most formidable Islamist units fighting Assad.

"We consider attending Geneva 2 on any basis other than that mentioned above ... treason that requires trials by our courts," it said, referring to the proposed peace conference.

....

The [Syrian National] Coalition is due to meet on Nov. 9 to discuss taking a detailed position on Geneva, according to opposition sources.

"Main Syrian rebel groups declare opposition to Geneva peace talks," [Al-Arabiya](#), 27 Oct 2013.

The Al-Arabiya report was based on a Reuters report: "Main Syrian rebel groups declare opposition to Geneva peace talks," [Reuters](#), 19:43 GMT, 27 Oct 2013.

It is one thing for a group to make a decision that affects itself, but an infringement of freedom when a group demands that everyone else make the same decision. This is my comment on their declaration that it is "treason" to attend Geneva2.

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### 28 Oct 2013

Brahimi has been meeting with governments since 19 Oct, to increase support for Geneva2. On 28 Oct, Brahimi arrived in Damascus. Reuters reports:

International envoy Lakhdar Brahimi held talks in Damascus on Monday [28 Oct] at the end of a Middle East tour to promote a Syrian peace conference, but regional tensions have cast a pall over his mission.

....

But opposition forces have not yet decided whether they will attend and Gulf Arab

states backing the Syrian rebels have soured on the talks after Brahimi said on Saturday [26 Oct] that their rival Iran, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's main regional ally, should join the international conference.

Brahimi met Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, in Damascus but there was no word on whether Assad would see him.

A senior Turkish official said the envoy has not pushed for any deal on his tour, remaining in "listening and watching mode" and leaving active negotiating to Moscow and Washington.

Riyadh [Saudi Arabia] and Tehran [Iran] see the struggle in Syria as determining which of them ends up with greater influence in the Arab world.

"Syria envoy in Damascus, but prospects for peace talks dim," [Reuters](#), 16:00 GMT, 28 Oct 2013.

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Meanwhile, the Free Syrian Army — the military arm of the Syrian National Coalition — effectively declined to participate in Geneva2:

The Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army [FSA] on Monday [28 Oct] rebuffed the participation of Syria's allies in the proposed Geneva II conference aimed to end the 31-month Syrian conflict.

"We will not sit down on the negotiation table with those who have blood on their hands. We consider Russia, China, Iran and [Lebanese Shiite group] Hezbollah as the regime's partners," FSA said in a statement.

While Hezbollah has sent fighters to battle rebels alongside Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, Russia and China have long vetoed resolutions threatening Damascus.

FSA said its conditions must be fulfilled if Syrian opposition to join the proposed peace talks.

....

"Assad must cede power and his regime members must be tried for all the crimes they committed against Syrians, and transfer of power to form a transitional government must take place," the statement added.

"Syrian rebel army snubs Iran, Russia participation in Geneva II," [Al-Arabiya](#), 18:19 GMT, 28 Oct 2013.

The possibility for Geneva2 is looking bleak indeed when the FSA — the rebel group backed by London 11 — not only demands that Assad resign, but also that Assad be tried for war crimes. That should make Assad feel very *unwelcome* in Geneva. Moreover, the FSA refuses to negotiate with Assad and also refuses to negotiate with any nation supporting Assad.

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**30 Oct 2013**

Brahimi met with Assad on 30 Oct. Reuters reports:

President Bashar al-Assad told U.N. envoy Lakhdar Brahimi on Wednesday [30 Oct] that talks to end Syria's civil war would only succeed if foreign powers ended support for rebels fighting to overthrow him.

Brahimi is in Damascus to meet Syrian officials in an effort to shore up support for the faltering peace talks.

State television quoted Assad as telling Brahimi, "the success of any political solution is tied to stopping support for terrorist groups and pressuring their patron states". Assad's government calls the armed opposition terrorists.

....

Assad and Iran, however, have said they will only go to talks that set no preconditions.

Assad said that "only the Syrian people are authorised to shape the future of Syria."

"Assad tells U.N. envoy peace talks can succeed only if aid to rebels stops," [Reuters](#), 12:49 GMT, 30 Oct 2013.

Later, *Al-Arabiya* reported:

Foreign support for Syrian rebels must stop for peace to take place in the war-battered country, President Bashar al-Assad told visiting U.N. Arab envoy Lakhdar Brahimi on Wednesday [30 Oct].

"The success of any political solution is tied to stopping support for terrorist groups and pressuring their patron states," the Syrian state television quoted Assad as saying.

Ahead of a planned peace conference in Geneva, Assad also told Brahimi that a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis cannot be dictated by foreign powers.

"The Syrian people are the only ones who have the right to decide on Syria's future, and any solution or agreement must have the acceptance of the Syrian people, and reflect their desires," Assad said.

Assad warned there must not be "any foreign intervention" in seeking a solution to Syria's civil war, in which an estimated 115,000 people have died in 31 months according to AFP.

Brahimi seemed to agree with Assad, saying: "The efforts being made for the Geneva conference to be held are focused on finding the way for the Syrians themselves to meet and to agree on solving the crisis as quickly as possible."

Wednesday's gathering is the first direct talks between the two men since December when Brahimi angered the Syrian ruling family by saying that it has been leading the country for too long.

"Assad: backing rebels must stop for peace to take place," [Al-Arabiya](#), 17:57 GMT, 30 Oct 2013.

See also [Al-Jazeera](#), 31 Oct 2013.

It is difficult to keep track of all of the demands and pre-conditions made by various rebel groups, foreign meddlers, and Assad's government. My comment is that, like it or not, Assad is the lawful ruler of Syria, having been most recently elected in 2007 for a term that ends in mid-2014. And as I said [above](#), Assad is the only strong leader that Syria has, and apparently the only person who can prevent jihadists and terrorists from occupying Syria.

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### 1 Nov 2013

Brahimi ended his visit to Damascus on 1 Nov. Agence France-Presse reports Brahimi's press conference in Damascus:

UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said Friday that a proposed Geneva peace conference to end the war in Syria could not be held without the participation of the opposition.

"If the opposition does not participate there will be no Geneva conference," Brahimi said at a news conference in Damascus before returning to Beirut as part of a regional tour to try to garner support for the US and Russian backed peace initiative.

"The participation of the opposition is essential, necessary and important," the veteran Algerian diplomat said, adding the proposed conference was intended "to help the Syrians and resolve their problems".

Brahimi, who met with President Bashar al-Assad on Wednesday [30 Oct], said "the Syrian government has agreed to participate in Geneva".

....

But Syria's increasingly divided opposition has thus far balked, with the National Coalition saying it will not take part in the so-called Geneva II process if Assad's resignation is not on the table, a demand rejected by Damascus.

Powerful rebel groups on the ground have meanwhile denied the Coalition represents them, and some Islamist brigades have warned any Syrians taking part in the talks would be viewed as traitors.

The Coalition, which is under pressure from its Western and Arab backers to attend Geneva II, is to meet on November 9 to decide whether to participate.

"Syria envoy says no peace talks without opposition," [GlobalPost](#).

Also see "Brahimi: no peace talks without Syrian opposition," [Al-Arabiya](#), 07:53 GMT, 1 Nov 2013, and "Brahimi: No Geneva talks without Syria rebels," [Al-Jazeera](#), 1 Nov 2013.

Later, Reuters reports Brahimi's press conference in Beirut:

The United Nations envoy to Syria said on Friday [1 Nov] there would be no



preconditions for long-delayed peace talks, an assertion likely to anger an opposition movement that says it will only attend if the goal is to remove President Bashar al-Assad.

....

The talks are meant to bring Syria's warring sides to the negotiating table, but have been repeatedly delayed because of disputes between world powers, divisions among the opposition and the irreconcilable positions of Assad and the rebels.

Brahimi has previously said he thought Assad would not be part of the transitional government that Geneva 2 would attempt to install. But on Friday he said his opinions on the matter had no bearing on parameters for the conference.

"My opinion isn't important. There is an agreement that attendance at Geneva 2 will not be based on any preconditions from any side," he told a news conference in Beirut.

....

Arab and Western officials said this week that international powers were unlikely to meet their goal of holding the conference in November.

"U.N. envoy says no preconditions for Syria peace talks," [Reuters](#), 15:37 GMT, 1 Nov 2013.

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## 2 Nov 2013

The Syrian government criticized Brahimi. *Al-Arabiya* reported:

A Syrian regime newspaper on Saturday called U.N.-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi "one-eyed and many-tongued" a day after he visited Damascus to discuss the Geneva II peace conference.

Brahimi "has played both sides, as though he wants to please all parties in the same way, forgetting that his role as an international mediator requires him to be neutral," Ath-Thawra newspaper said in an editorial.

It lashed out at Brahimi's efforts to hold the conference between the regime and rebels within weeks, saying he was acting with "unnecessary haste."

Brahimi expressed hopes that the conference would be held "in the coming weeks, not next year."

"Syrian regime paper calls Brahimi 'one-eyed and many-tongued'," [Al-Arabiya](#), 20:20 GMT, 2 Nov 2013.

It is not known what Syria expects to gain from insulting the host of the Geneva2 negotiations. As for "unnecessary haste", the Russians and the USA have been trying since 7 May 2013, six months ago, to schedule Geneva2. Approximately 5000 people are dying each month in the Syrian civil war, so there is genuine urgency.

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### 3 Nov 2013

On 3 Nov, the head of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) expressed conditions for SNC participation in Geneva2. Reuters reported two conditions:

The Syrian opposition set terms on Sunday [3 Nov] for attending peace talks to end the Syrian civil war, in a move that throws the proposed conference into further confusion after the international envoy said there should be no preconditions.

....

Syrian National Coalition President Ahmad Jarba said the opposition would not attend unless there was a clear timeframe for President Bashar al-Assad to leave power. He also said they could not accept the presence of Iran.

"We have decided not to enter Geneva talks unless it is with dignity, and unless there is a successful transfer of power with a specific timeframe, and without the occupier Iran at the negotiating table," Jarba told an Arab League emergency meeting of foreign minister in Cairo.

....

Arab and Western officials have said that international powers were unlikely to meet their goal of holding the conference in November.

Even if Jarba were to attend the Geneva 2 meetings, he has no authority over the rebel brigades battling to overthrow Assad.

"Syria opposition lays preconditions for peace talks," [Reuters](#), 21:12 GMT, 3 Nov 2013.

*Al-Arabiya* mentions two conditions for SNC participation in Geneva2, in addition to the two conditions that Reuters mentioned in the above quotation:

[Jarba] also said the Iran-backed Lebanese Shiite group, Hezbollah, who is fighting alongside Syrian forces against rebels, should be blacklisted.

Additionally, Iraqi Shiite militia, Abu Fadhel al-Abbas, battling against rebels with Hezbollah should also be listed as a terrorist group, Jarba added.

"Syrian opposition: No peace talks if Assad doesn't cede power," [Al-Arabiya](#), 18:15 GMT, 3 Nov 2013.

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### 4 Nov 2013

During a visit to the capital of Saudi Arabia on 4 Nov, Kerry said:

.... But I will make it clear: We will continue to support the opposition in the meantime and we will not stand idly by while Assad continues to use weapons enormously disproportionate to those in the possession of the opposition in order to kill innocent men, women, and children.

We appreciate the strong Arab League communique that was issued last night [3 Nov], encouraging the Syrian Opposition Coalition to go to Geneva to negotiate. And I want to underscore the importance that we, and all of our regional partners, feel about continuing our very close coordination on our common objectives in Syria. There is no difference about our mutually agreed upon objective in Syria. As I have said many times before, Assad has lost all legitimacy and Assad must go. There must be a new transitional governing body in Syria in order to permit the possibility of peace and an end to the human suffering, and we do not believe that there is a way or see how that war can end or that suffering will be ended as long as Assad is there.

[State Dept.](#), 4 Nov 2013.

See also "U.S and Saudi Arabia agree there should be 'no role' for Assad," [Al-Arabiya](#).

**My comment:** Ideally, the people of Syria (including those in refugee camps) should vote on the leadership of the Syrian government. *If* a vote is not feasible, then whether to create a transitional government in Syria — and Assad's role in Syria — *should* be issues to be decided at the Geneva2 conference. Instead, foreign meddlers have already decided there will be a transitional government in Syria, Assad will have no place in that transitional government, and the Syrian National Coalition is the sole representative of the Syrian people. Meanwhile, the Syrian National Coalition is disintegrating and has postponed its decision whether to attend Geneva2 until 9 Nov. I offer this metaphor: Syria is a dead animal on the highway, and vultures are fighting over who eats it.

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Six more rebel groups departed from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) — the military arm of the Syrian National Council — and joined the jihadists. *Al-Jazeera* reports:

Six Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups in the Northern countryside of Aleppo have pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda arm in Syria Jabhat al-Nusra, according to new reports.

Local activists told Al Jazeera that small opposition groups find themselves forced to join bigger and stronger battalions to guarantee protection, especially after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, another al-Qaeda-affiliated group, declared war on several FSA battalions.

[Al-Jazeera](#), 4 Nov 2013.

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This evening, Syria reiterated that it would *not* go to Geneva and relinquish Assad's power. The BBC reported:

Late on Monday [4 Nov], Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zohbi said his country would not take part in the proposed conference if the aim was to get Mr Assad to step down.

"We will not go to Geneva to hand over power as desired by [Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud] al-Faisal and certain opponents abroad," he said in comments carried by the official Sana news agency.

[BBC](#), 5 Nov 2013.

See also [Global Post](#) and [Al-Jazeera](#).

Notice that al-Zohbi attributes the demand that Assad resign to Saudi Arabia, when the demand actually comes from the Syrian National Coalition and *all* of the London 11, including Saudi Arabia. Of course, the Syrian government would appear weaker if it acknowledged that everyone (except Russia and Iran) was opposing Assad.

*Al-Arabiya* reported:

Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zohbi said the Syrian regime will not attend a planned peace conference in Geneva if the aim is for President Bashar al-Assad to hand over power.

Al-Zohbi said efforts to arrange the so-called Geneva II talks still focus on finding a political solution for the ongoing crisis.

"President Bashar al-Assad will remain head of state," he added in statements carried by the official SANA news agency.

"Syrian regime says not going to Geneva talks to hand over power," [Al-Arabiya](#), 07:58 GMT, 5 Nov 2013.

This one issue, whether or not Assad continues to lead Syria, is enough to prevent the Geneva2 negotiations from occurring. Instead of making a conclusion, I think diplomats ought to focus on a procedure for reaching a conclusion, e.g., a vote by the people in Syria.

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### 5 Nov 2013

Today, Brahimi met in Geneva with deputy foreign ministers from Russia and the USA in an attempt to salvage Geneva2.

Speaking in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov criticized the numerous preconditions demanded by the Syrian National Coalition. At the end of the TASS news story about Lavrov's criticism is the terse remark:

A source close to the trilateral talks which concluded in the Palace of Nations earlier on Tuesday [5 Nov], told Itar-Tass that Geneva II will be held no earlier than in December.

"Syrian National Coalition preconditions run counter Geneva communique," [TASS](#), 5 Nov 2013.

Once again, the Syrians — Assad and the rebels — have scuttled Geneva2. The 23-24 Nov date for Geneva2 that had been proposed by Brahimi (and leaked to the public on 17 Oct and 20 Oct) has now been abandoned. The next meeting of Russia, USA, and Brahimi to *prepare* for Geneva2 has been scheduled for 25 Nov. [TASS](#).

See also [Al-Arabiya](#) and [Al-Jazeera](#).

Later, the BBC reported:

The UN-Arab League envoy on Syria has said that a peace conference he had hoped to hold in Geneva this month has been delayed but he is still "striving" for a summit by

the end of the year.

Lakhdar Brahimi said after a day of meetings with senior diplomats that he was not able to announce a date.

Attempts to set up a conference have been going on for months amid disputes over who should attend and its agenda.

Mr Brahimi said he would meet US and Russian diplomats again on 25 November.

"We were hoping that we'd be in a position to announce a date today [5 Nov], unfortunately we're not," he told reporters.

"But we're still hoping that we'll be able to have the conference before the end of the year."

The envoy added that "nothing dramatic" had happened at Tuesday's talks and the failure to agree a date had been expected for several weeks.

"Syria conflict: No date for peace conference — UN envoy," [BBC](#), 19:37 GMT, 5 Nov 2013.

Later, Reuters reported:

The United States and Russia failed on Tuesday [5 Nov] to agree a date for a Syrian peace conference, remaining divided over what role Iran might play in talks to end the civil war and over who would represent Syria's opposition.

....

Brahimi said he would bring Russian and U.S. officials together again on November 25 and hoped that opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would have agreed on delegates to represent them some days before that.

"The opposition has a very, very difficult time," he said. "They are divided. It is no secret for anybody. They are facing all types of problems and they are not ready."

"U.S., Russia fail to agree on Syria peace talks date," [Reuters](#), 21:06 GMT, 5 Nov 2013.

*The New York Times* reported:

Mr. Brahimi made it clear that the lack of preparation on the part of Syria's opposition was an acute and immediate cause for delaying a peace conference. "They are divided, that's no secret for anyone, they are facing all sorts of problems," he said.

"Diplomats Fail to Agree on Details for Syria Peace Talks," [NY Times](#), 5 Nov 2013.

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It was easy to predict that the Geneva2 talks would fail — in fact, the intransigence and preconditions of the rebels and Assad prevented the talks from being scheduled. And so it was a brilliant move that a member of Assad's government proposes an *election* in which the Syrian people decide. Not only is an election fairer to the Syrian people, but also it avoids the inability of Assad and the rebels to negotiate a solution. The BBC says:

Dr Bouthaina Shaaban [a Syrian Presidential Advisor] told the BBC's Lyse Doucet that President Assad has said many times that the only way to deal with this issue is through elections or a referendum.

Speaking in Damascus, Dr Shaaban said the the main issue now was not about power. "Saving the country and the Syrian people is the utmost priority, power comes next," she said.

"Assad's advisor: 'Let the Syrian people decide future'," [BBC](#), approximately 20:30 GMT, 5 Nov 2013.

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### My opinion

Here is what 32 months of military conflict in Syria have accomplished:

- Approximately 120,000 dead people by 31 Oct 2013, increasing at approximately 5000/month.
- More than two million refugees have fled from Syria.
- More than six million refugees have been displaced inside Syria.
- Syrian economy in shambles. United Nations estimates 40% of people in Syria now need humanitarian assistance. ([BBC](#).)
- Exacerbated religious differences between Alawites (branch of Shiite muslims) and Sunni muslims (e.g., Sunni jihadists and Al-Qaeda) and Hezbollah (Shiite militia) from Lebanon. This has wrecked a secular Syrian nation, created a religious civil war, and may possibly lead to a future Islamist government in Syria with Sharia law.
- No clear military victory for either Assad, the rebels, or the jihadists.

Here is what diplomats have accomplished on the Syrian crisis:

- **nothing**.

Yeah, there was a Geneva1 Communiqué in June 2012, but *no one* from Syria was represented at that meeting, which makes it meaningless in my opinion. Diplomats have been trying since 7 May 2013 to schedule Geneva2, but have been unable to set a meeting date. Unless the rebels back away from their refusal to meet with Assad, *and* unless Assad backs away from his refusal to negotiate with rebels fighting his government, there never will be a meeting between them. For a compromise, *both* Assad *and* the rebels need to shed their preconditions and demands.

The fighting seems to be at a stalemate, and the diplomats have repeated spectacular failures. Clearly, it is time for a new approach. The proposal of Dr. Shaaban on 5 Nov, apparently endorsed by Assad, for elections in Syria offers a fresh way to solve the crisis. It is not clear whether either the loser in the elections or the jihadists would accept the result of an election, but diplomats can deal with that problem after the elections.

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6-9 Nov 2013

On 6 Nov, the Russians took the lead, by inviting Syrian rebel groups to an informal meeting in Moscow. The Syrian government has also been invited. TASS named four rebel groups:

- Syrian National Coordinating Committee for Democratic Change,
- Kurdistan's Democratic Union Party,
- United Nationals Democratic Alliance in Syria,
- Coalition of Secular and Democratic Syrians.

See: "Moscow invites Syrian opposition, govt to hold informal talks," [rt.com](#), 6 Nov 2013; "Syrian opposition agrees to informal talks over Geneva-2 in Moscow," [TASS](#), 7 Nov 2013; "Moscow To Host Talks Of Syrian Regime, Opposition," [Associated Press](#), 09:00 EST, 7 Nov 2013; "Syrian Opposition Positive About Informal Talks in Russia," [RIA-Novosti](#), 8 Nov 2013.

I think this may be the beginning of the end of the Syrian National Coalition as the sole representative of *all* of the rebels, as Russia recognizes other rebel groups.

Later on 8 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition refused to participate in the informal discussions in Moscow. RIA-Novosti reports:

The Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces refused on Friday [8 Nov] to take part in an informal meeting with Syrian government officials in Moscow aimed at resolving the current humanitarian crisis in the war-torn country.

Russia had earlier proposed to host informal peace talks involving all political forces in the Syrian civil war to establish dialogue between the warring parties ahead of an upcoming peace conference on Syria in Geneva.

....

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday [8 Nov] that the date of the Geneva conference could not be coordinated because the Syrian opposition had put forward certain preconditions, including that Syrian President Bashar Assad would step down and forgo participation in a transitional government.

"This intransigence and these demands are being asserted by the National Coalition, which claims to be the only representative of the Syrian people, but which doesn't represent even a majority of the groups opposing Assad's regime," Lavrov said.

"Syrian Rebel Coalition Shuns Moscow Talks," [RIA-Novosti](#), 8 Nov 2013.

Perhaps sensing that Russia is looking for alternative rebel organizations to replace the intransigent and slow-to-decide Syrian National Coalition, the Coalition remarked in a press release during a two-day meeting:

Saleh [Director of the Coalition's Media Office] ridiculed Assad's attempt along with his Russian allies to "present an opposition that is approved by the regime to engage it in the negotiations."

[Syrian National Coalition](#), 9 Nov 2013.

The same press release also says:

Saleh re-asserted the Syrian Coalition's "willingness to participate in any political process that aims to accomplish the demands of the Syrian people, referring to the Syrian Coalition's support of the London Communique [on 22 Oct], which was a positive step in the context of further clarification regarding Geneva I."

*Ibid.*; also see [TASS](#), 9 Nov 2013.

Notice the propagandist trick of pretending that the Syrian National Coalition actually implements "the demands of the Syrian people", when there has been no vote by the Syrian people about what they want.

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### jihadists

Ayman al-Zawahri, head of Al-Qaeda, has appointed jihadists in the al-Nusra Front as the sole representative of Al-Qaeda in Syria. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was ordered to end activities in Syria, and stay in Iraq. al-Zawahri apparently gave these orders in June 2013, but an audio tape was published on 8 Nov. See [france24.com](#), 8 Nov 2013; and [Al-Arabiya](#), 9 Nov 2013.

The conclusion seems to be that not even al-Zawahri can control the jihadists, because ISIL continues to operate in Syria. Everyone focuses on negotiations between the rebels and Assad, and ignores the jihadists. But someday, Syria will need to stop the jihadists.

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### 10-11 Nov 2013: Syrian National Coalition

Russia and the USA have been trying to schedule Geneva2 since 7 May 2013. Since early October 2013, Brahimi has worked diligently to schedule Geneva2. However, the Syrian National Coalition — the rebels favored by the London 11, including the U.S. government — spewed preconditions and demands, but never committed to attending Geneva2. Previously (see 20 Oct above), the Coalition was supposed to decide whether or not to attend Geneva2 on 1-2 Nov 2013. This failure of the Coalition to decide whether or not to attend Geneva2 was at least partly responsible for Brahimi's decision on 5 Nov to postpone Geneva2 until December 2013 or later.

After a two-day meeting on 9-10 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition finally — after six months of frustrating delay — again postponed any decision to attend Geneva2. However, they did reiterate the following conditions for their possible appearance at Geneva2:

- "no role for Assad in any political process in Syria" (neither in transitional government nor in future government)
- ceasefire
- the release of detainees
- formation of a transitional government
- withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria:
  - Iran ("If they [withdraw all of their militias], then we can discuss the Iranian attendance in Geneva II.")
  - Hezbollah (from Lebanon)



- Iraq's Abu Fadhl al-Abbas

The quotations are from Khaled al-Saleh, spokesman for the Syrian National Coalition at a press conference on 10 Nov, at the end of the two-day meeting. [Al-Arabiya](#), 19:45 GMT, 10 Nov 2013.

But, even if the above-mentioned conditions are satisfied, the Syrian National Coalition might still refuse to attend Geneva2. *Al-Arabiya* also reported:

The spokesman said [the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)] ... is currently talking with rebels and civilians inside Syria before making any decisions on Geneva II.

....

Sources told Reuters late on Saturday that the SNC wants approval from fighters inside the country first to give the process of entering the Geneva talks more legitimacy.

The sources said the SNC wants to seek the backing of rebel fighting units, community leaders and activists inside Syria for its participation in Geneva, to counter criticism that it is out of touch with those battling on the ground.

*Ibid.*

Agence France-Press reported:

Syria's fractious opposition coalition announced Sunday it will not attend mooted peace talks in Geneva unless it received the backing of rebels on the ground.

[Syrian National Coalition] Spokesman Khaled Saleh, speaking to reporters in Istanbul on the second day of a coalition meeting there, said the opposition and the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) "are on the same side and we are fighting a common enemy".

"If we are going to be in Geneva, they are going to be part of that delegation. They have as much interest in a successful and free democratic Syria as we do."

....

Saleh said the Turkey-based coalition would send two delegations into Syria to discuss with FSA leaders and civilian groups the prospect of participating in the Geneva talks.

The coalition was also continuing to work on a statement setting out its formal position on the talks, he said.

"Syria opposition to spurn Geneva talks without rebel backing," [france24.com](#), 17:01, 10 Nov 2013.

Part copied at [Al-Jazeera](#). See also "Syrian opposition wants rebel backing for Geneva talks," [Reuters](#), 19:29 GMT, 10 Nov 2013.

In a surprise, early in the morning on 11 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition voted to attend Geneva2, but with a list of conditions. Journalists emphasized the decision to attend Geneva2, without noticing that the conditions would probably scuttle the conference by discouraging Assad from attending. Here are the conditions, as reported by the Associated

Press and/or Reuters:

- "no role" for Assad in either transitional government or in future government
- the Syrian government must:
  - create humanitarian corridors for relief agencies to deliver supplies to besieged areas, *and*
  - release all political prisoners
- Geneva2 must create a transitional government in Syria.

See "Syrian Opposition Group Aims To Attend Peace Talks," [Associated Press](#), 03:09 GMT, 11 Nov 2013; "Syrian opposition agrees to participate in Geneva peace talks," [Reuters](#), 07:25 GMT, 11 Nov 2013; "Syrian National Coalition agrees to attend Geneva peace talks," [Al-Arabiya](#), 07:30 GMT, 11 Nov 2013; "Syrian National Coalition agrees Geneva talks position," [BBC](#), 11:41 GMT, 11 Nov 2013; "Syria opposition sets preconditions for talks," [Al-Jazeera](#), 11 Nov 2013.

At night on 11 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition posted an English-language press release at their website about their vote early on 11 Nov. This press release expresses their official preconditions for attending Geneva2:

The [General Assembly of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces] endorsed the Syrian Coalition's readiness to participate in a Geneva conference based on the transfer of power to a transitional governing body (TGB). This body should include full executive powers including presidential powers with control over military and security apparatus. Furthermore, the Assad Regime and those associated with him will have no role in the transitional period and future Syria.

The Syrian Coalition stipulates that prior to the conference access for relief convoys, including the Red Cross and the Red Crescent IFRC and other international relief agencies, to all besieged areas must be ensured, and prisoners, especially women and children, must be released.

The Syrian Coalition stresses that in any international conference aimed to achieve a political transition, the Assad regime should commit to resolutions and principles set out by the international community, primarily

- the UN Resolution No. 67/262, May 15, 2013,
- the UNSC Resolution No. 2118, September 27, 2013,
- the UNSC presidential statement No. 739, October 02, 2013,
- the London 11 final communiqué, October 22, 2013, and
- the Arab League Resolution No. 7716, November 04, 2013.

"A Statement by the Syrian Coalition's General Assembly," [Syrian National Coalition](#), 19:34 GMT, 11 Nov 2013. (indented list added by Standler).

**My comments:** On 10 Nov, after six months of indecision, the Syrian National Coalition is still *unable* to decide whether or not to attend Geneva2. With that kind of glacial indecision, does anyone believe that the Syrian National Coalition is capable of leading a nation? The Coalition *should* have talked to the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups months ago.

I believe the time has come to consider the Syrian National Coalition as an impediment to peace in Syria, and unworthy of leading a future Syrian government.

On 11 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition says they will attend Geneva2 *only* if Assad has no role in either transitional government or in future government. That demands that Assad relinquish power. In effect, this gives the rebels a political victory over Assad, instead of the military victory that they have been seeking since March 2011.

But Assad is the legitimate ruler of Syria, elected to a term that expires in mid-2014. Assad is not only defending a stable, secular government in Syria, but also Assad is clearly a stronger leader than the indecisive Syrian National Coalition. As I argued above, Assad is everyone's best hope of avoiding both (1) anarchy from fragmented/disorganized rebels and (2) an Islamic state established by the jihadists. Assad is an indispensable party to any negotiations about Syria, but Assad has good reasons to avoid negotiations that *require* his resignation.

So when the Syrian National Coalition says they will attend Geneva2 *only* if Assad resigns, the rebels are *not* helping the peace process. It is undesirable if Assad attends Geneva2, but the rebels are absent. It is equally undesirable if the rebels attend Geneva2, but Assad is absent. *All* relevant parties are needed at Geneva2, without preconditions. When the Syrian National Coalition establishes a list of preconditions for their attendance at Geneva2, the Coalition has not really agreed to attend.

Consequently, I continue to believe the time has come to consider the Syrian National Coalition as an impediment to peace in Syria, and unworthy of leading a future Syrian government.

Also note the list of five documents at the end of the Syrian National Coalition's press release, quoted above. In particular: "the Assad regime should commit to resolutions and principles set out by the international community, primarily . . . the London 11 final communiqué, October 22, 2013, ...." Remember *neither* Assad's government *nor* supporters of Assad (e.g., Russia and Iran) were invited to the London 11 meeting. This London 11 communiqué is an anti-Assad diatribe, concocted by enemies of Assad, and should *not* be imposed on Assad. A fundamental aspect of due process of law is the opportunity to be heard, *before* a decision is made.

Similarly, the Arab League recognized the Coalition as the sole representatives of Syria on 25 March 2013, so Assad was *not* included in the preparation of the League's Resolution in Nov 2013. Therefore, the Arab League's Resolution should also *not* be imposed on Assad.

As explained [above](#) it was clear on 10 Nov that the Syrian National Coalition had again postponed their decision on whether or not to attend Geneva2. Then, in a surprise, early in the morning of 11 Nov, the Coalition decided to attend Geneva2 (but only if preconditions are satisfied). What happened between 10 and 11 Nov, to cause the change? *The New York Times* explained:

During the fractious weekend debates that ended with the main Syrian exile opposition coalition yielding to international pressure by dropping its refusal to hold peace talks

with President Bashar al-Assad's government, tensions ran so high that one prominent coalition member slapped another in the face, participants in the gathering said.

In the hallways outside the meeting at an Istanbul hotel, young antigovernment activists exasperated with the coalition's failure to forge an effective opposition said they had grudgingly pressed the group to approve the peace talks, calling them the only hope to slow the killing of Syrians.

Stoking tensions all around, Robert S. Ford, the United States ambassador to Syria, told the activists on the sidelines that the emerging reality presented them with unpalatable options: accept that the current government could continue in power longer than they would like, or face the continued rise of extremist jihadist groups that have terrified residents, clashed with rival insurgents and undermined Western support.

Under intense American, British and European pressure, the coalition voted early Monday, after two days of debate, that it would attend peace talks sponsored by the United States and Russia in Geneva if certain conditions were met, including full access for delivery of humanitarian aid and the release of prisoners.

....

But while United States officials hailed the step as significant, it risks becoming the latest of many tentative moves toward talks that have proved illusory, since the coalition retained its demand that Mr. Assad play no role in any future political transition, a condition the Syrian government rejects.

....

Independent analysts monitoring the conflict say it is increasingly clear that while a political transition could end with Mr. Assad leaving office, it is increasingly unrealistic to expect his government to agree to that in advance.

Inside the country, a growing number of people on both sides of the conflict complain that nobody seems to represent their desire to end the war and the suffering it has created, with nine million people forced from their homes and well over 100,000 dead.

....

With the Monday vote, the coalition appeared to drop its demand that Mr. Assad step down before any talks. But it continued to insist that it would participate only if there are guarantees that the talks would lead to a full transfer of executive power, including over military and security forces, to a transitional government in which Mr. Assad and "those with blood on their hands" would have "no role."

Anne Barnard, "Leading Syrian Opposition Group, Yielding to Pressure, Votes to Join Peace Talks," [NY Times](#), 11 Nov 2013.

Part published at [Globe & Mail](#), 11 Nov 2013.

To summarize, diplomats in the United Kingdom, USA, and European Union "intensely"

persuaded (i.e., arm-twisted) the Syrian National Coalition to get an agreement to attend Geneva2 (but only if the Coalition's preconditions are satisfied). If Western Civilization needs to exert influence to get the Coalition to do something as benign as attend a conference, then the Coalition is surely *unfit* to lead Syria.

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### 13-14 Nov 2013

On 13 Nov, there is an interesting news article in TASS about the reaction of Qadri Jamil — now introduced as the "leader of the Syrian Popular Front for Change and Liberation" — to the 11 Nov declaration that the Coalition would attend Geneva2. The TASS article does *not* mention that Jamil was sacked as deputy prime minister of Syria on 29 Oct, which was discussed [above](#). TASS says:

Several delegations of the opponents of the Damascus incumbent authorities should be sent to participate in Geneva-2, Qadri Jamil said. "There are many organizations in the opposition, we do not even agree with Russia that it is needed to bring one delegation of the opposition (in Geneva)," he said. "The opposition cannot have a common platform," he noted.

....

Qadri Jamil also has urged an end to foreign military intervention in the conflict in Syria. "Tens of thousands of foreign mercenaries are fighting on the side of the Opposition in Syria," Jamil told a news conference in Moscow. "This is very dangerous for the region in general, because these people will then go to other countries to breed destruction and murder." "We are demanding a stop to foreign intervention," Jamil said. "This malignant tumor must be stopped."

"Internal Syrian opposition welcomes National Coalition ready to participate in Geneva-2," [TASS](#), 13 Nov 2013.

Similar report at [Voice of Russia](#), 13 Nov 2013.

I wonder if Russia is grooming Jamil to lead Syria after Assad?

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Syria is already fragmented, with different rebel groups each occupying small pieces of land. On 11 Nov, the Kurds in Syria declared their land as an autonomous region. On 13 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition angrily replied that the Kurds were "hostile to the Syrian revolution". [france24.com](#), 13 Nov 2013; [Al-Arabiya](#), 14 Nov 2013; [Al-Jazeera](#), 13 Nov.

In my opinion, this is just another detail in the slow disintegration of Syria. This event also shows the lack of leadership by the Coalition — the Coalition should have enticed the Kurds to join the Coalition.

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Where is Brahimi and what is he doing to schedule Geneva2? My search of Google News on 14 Nov 2013 showed the last news report about Brahimi was on 5 Nov, when he failed to schedule Geneva2 for 23-24 Nov.

Coincidentally, a newspaper in Syria leaked that Geneva2 would occur on 12 Dec 2013, although a formal announcement from the United Nations will come later. [france24.com](#), 17:20, 14 Nov; [Al-Bawaba](#), 11:55 GMT, 14 Nov.

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### 15-16 Nov 2013

Back on [6 Nov](#), the Russian government invited the Syrian rebels to Moscow to informal discussions before Geneva2. On 15 Nov, RIA-Novosti reports:

The main Western-backed Syrian opposition group is yet undecided on Russia's invitation to visit Moscow to discuss a forthcoming peace conference in Geneva, a spokesman for the Syrian National Coalition said Friday [15 Nov].

Spokesman Louay Safi said the decision would be made "within the next two days."

The international peace conference was proposed by Russia and the United States in May and designed to bring all sides of the Syrian civil war together. So far, the opposition's reluctance to take part remains the main obstacle for the talks.

A Russian Foreign Ministry source said Friday that a delegation from Syria's ruling regime would visit Moscow on Monday [18 Nov] for "detailed consultations in the context of preparing for the Geneva-2 conference."

"Syrian Opposition Mulls Visit to Russia," [RIA-Novosti](#), 15 Nov 2013.

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On 16 Nov 2013, TASS reports that Lavrov effectively said that the Syrian National Coalition was *not* a credible representative of the Syrian people:

Syria's National Coalition has no constructive platform for people except for its call for the change of government, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

"The National Coalition [for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces] is not the only mechanism of the Syrian opposition," the minister told the Postsriptum television program on Saturday, November 16. "The Coalition consists mainly of people who emigrated from Syria to Europe and other countries a long time ago. They are now concerned with working out their position because apart from changing the regime they have no constructive platform to offer to the Syrian population."

"I do not think they have much support within Syria because the structures operating there are made up not of emigrants but of those who have never left Syria and who work in the opposition that is not loyal to the regime," Lavrov said.

"Lavrov: Syria's National Coalition has no viable program for the people," [TASS](#), 16 Nov 2013.

Lavrov's remarks sound similar to Hillary Clinton's remarks on 31 Oct 2012, when she criticized the Syrian National Council as old expatriates from Syria. See [above](#).

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On 16 Sep, the Associated Press reports:

Forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad have firmly seized the momentum in the country's civil war in recent weeks, capturing one rebel stronghold after another and triumphantly planting the two-starred Syrian government flag amid shattered buildings and rubble-strewn streets.

Despite global outrage over the use of chemical weapons, Assad's government is successfully exploiting divisions among the opposition, dwindling foreign help for the rebel cause and significant local support, all linked to the same thing: discomfort with the Islamic extremists who have become a major part of the rebellion.

The battlefield gains would strengthen the government's hand in peace talks sought by the world community.

.... The Western-backed opposition in exile, which has little support among rebel fighters inside Syria and even less control over them, has set several conditions for its participation [in Geneva2], ....

Ryan Lucas, "Assad Gaining Ground In Syrian Civil War," [Associated Press](#), 13:41 GMT, 16 Nov 2013.

*The New York Times* also noted that Assad had "recent battlefield successes" and "Mr. Assad has made gains, and the momentum has tipped, at least for now, in his direction" — but "declarations of victory may be premature". Anne Barnard, "Syrian Government's Forces Gain, but a Siege War Goes On," [NY Times](#), 16 Nov 2013.

There *may* be a military solution to the Syrian civil war sometime next year. If supplies of munitions to the rebels from foreign nations truly dwindle, the rebellion could collapse. Then the battle would be between Syria and the jihadis.

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### 18-21 Nov 2013

Back on [6 Nov](#), the Russian government invited the Syrian rebels and Syrian government to Moscow for informal discussions before Geneva2. On 17 Nov, Agence France-Presse reported that the Coalition declined to attend:

Syrian opposition chief Ahmed Jarba is "very interested" in travelling to Moscow to meet officials from the Russian government, a major backer of the Damascus regime, an advisor to Jarba told AFP Sunday [17 Nov].

Russia invited National Coalition president Jarba to Moscow from November 18 to 21, which would have coincided with a visit by representatives from President Bashar al-Assad's government, said Munzer Aqbiq.

But the opposition head "regretted" being unable to visit Moscow on Monday [18 Nov], due to "preset official commitments", the adviser added.

"President Jarba received an invitation from (Russian Foreign) Minister (Sergei)

Lavrov for an official visit to Moscow for talks", he said.

Jarba "expresses a high interest in the Coalition for relations and talks with Russia as well as his interest in visiting Moscow", Aqbiq said.

The comments come a day before a Syrian government delegation is set to arrive in Moscow.

Moscow and the Coalition will "coordinate ... a new date for a visit," Aqbiq added. "Syria opposition chief 'very interested' in Moscow meeting," [france24.com](http://france24.com), 19:50, 17 Nov 2013.

Also see: "Syrian opposition leader declines Russian invitation as fighting in Damascus continues," [Al-Bawaba](http://Al-Bawaba), 05:24 GMT, 18 Nov 2013.

On 18 Nov, RIA-Novosti reports that the rebels declined, but the Syrian government came to Moscow for three days of intensive discussions.

Syrian officials met with senior Russian diplomats in Moscow on Monday [18 Nov] to discuss prospects for long-delayed peace talks on the civil war raging inside the Middle Eastern nation.

The delegation of Syrian officials, which included presidential advisor Bouthaina Shaaban and Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad, declined to comment on the outcome of their consultations with the Russian Foreign Ministry.

....

The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces' secretary general Badr Jamus told RIA Novosti on Monday [18 Nov] that the coalition is ready to send a delegation to Moscow for talks, but at a different time as the coalition's head Ahmad Jarba could not go in the period proposed by Russia (November 18-21). "Syria, Russia Discuss Plans for Geneva Peace Talks," [RIA-Novosti](http://RIA-Novosti), 18 Nov 2013.

My comment is that the rebels obviously know how to fight and kill, and the Coalition knows how to spew demands and preconditions. Now they need to learn how to negotiate, if they are to lead Syria. If their other "commitments" really exist, then the Coalition should have declined earlier. Better, the Coalition should have canceled their alleged other "commitments" and gone to Moscow, to get experience in negotiating with the lawful government of Syria.

During 10 Nov to 20 Nov, there was no mention by journalists of the four minor rebel groups in Syria who were invited to the meeting in Moscow on [6 Nov](#). This would have been a splendid opportunity for them to increase their credibility as future leaders of Syria.

Then, on 21 Nov, *Al-Bawaba* reported that Assad had prevented one rebel group in Syria from traveling to Moscow:

Agence France-Presse reported Thursday [21 Nov] that Syrian opposition leader Rajaa Nasser was arrested by government police days before he was scheduled to leave for



talks in Moscow. The dissident, who is party to the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC), was recently "tolerated" by President Bashar al-Assad's regime, but Thursday's arrest represents a new turn of the tides.

Nasser was arrested in the Baramkeh district of Damascus by a security patrol according to AFP's source, party chief Hassan Abdel Azim. No details or justification for his arrest were provided, but Azim and Nasser had been scheduled to go to Moscow November 26 to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"'Tolerated' Syrian opposition leader arrested ahead of meeting with Russians," [Al-Bawaba](#), 21 Nov 2013.

See also [Daily Star](#) in Lebanon; but apparently not reported in English-language Agence France-Presse.

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**22 Nov 2013**

### **Merger creates "The Islamic Front"**

*Al-Jazeera* reports that seven Islamic rebel groups in Syria have merged:

Seven major Islamist rebel groups battling President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria have announced a merger to form an "Islamic Front" and pledged to build an Islamic state in a post-Assad Syria.

Friday's merger is dubbed as the largest between different groupings and blocs. The new front represents "a full fusion" of groups and not merely a coordination body, rebels told Al Jazeera.

"The Islamic Front is an independent military and social force that is aimed at bringing down Assad's regime in Syria and at replacing it with a just Islamic state," the groups said in a statement, published on Friday [22 Nov].

The factions joining the merger are Aleppo's biggest fighting force Liwa al-Tawhid, the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham, the Idlib-based Soqour al-Sham, the Homs-based al-Haq Brigades, Ansar al-Sham, and the Damascus-based Army of Islam. The Kurdish Islamic Front also joined the front.

....

Al-Sheikh [the head of the Consultative Council of the new Islamic Front] said the Front would cooperate with all "loyal fighters" in Syria and that it would work with the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The FSA, set up with the backing of Western and regional powers in an attempt to unite the different armed groups and isolate what were seen as extremist elements, is the military arm of the Syrian National Coalition [SNC], the country's main political opposition bloc.

The SNC has been heavily criticised by activists and rebels inside Syria, who saw it as

implementing a western agenda and accused it of being out of touch with the people on the ground.

Basma Atassi, "Major Syrian rebel groups join forces," [Al-Jazeera](#), 22 Nov 2013.

Reuters reports that six [sic] Islamic rebel groups (but *neither* Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) *nor* the al-Nusra Front — the Al-Qaeda groups in Syria) in Syria have merged: Islamist fighters in Syria have joined forces to form what may be the biggest rebel army in the country, further undermining Western-backed military commanders and potentially challenging al Qaeda.

The announcement on Friday [22 Nov] of a common leadership for the Islamic Front, an amalgam of six major Islamist groups which had earlier declared an intention to merge, coincided with accounts of a battle on the Turkish border between rival Islamists that ended with al Qaeda allies taking control of the town of Atma.

Factional fighting and fragmentation among those seeking to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad have hampered the revolt and the latest effort to unite has yet to show that it can result in effective coordination among groups which between them control large parts of Syria and some tens of thousands of fighters.

Gains by Assad since the United States held back from intervening following a poison gas attack on rebel territory in August have both hardened many rebels against the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), notionally charged with coordinating the war, and also galvanized some major formations to come together.

Ahmed Abu Eissa, leader of the Suqour al-Sham brigades, was named head of the Islamic Front, members of other groups said.

In announcing its formation in a video statement broadcast on Al Jazeera, Abu Eissa said: "This independent political, military and social formation aims to topple the Assad regime completely and build an Islamic state where the sovereignty of almighty God alone will be our reference and ruler."

"Syria Islamists unite as faction — fighting goes on," [Reuters](#), 17:32 GMT, 22 Nov 2013.

*The Washington Post* remarked on the significance of the merger:

Charles Lister, an analyst at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, said the new Islamic Front appeared to be mainly an attempt to centralize militarily and politically, but he added that "it is very likely that this move will result in further funding from Gulf states."

Lister described the group — which he estimated will bring together at least 45,000 fighters — as an "extremely significant development" that further undermines the Western-backed Supreme Military Council and its political arm, the Syrian Opposition Coalition.

Its formation [i.e., the merger] is also expected to raise questions about the relevance of U.S.- and Russian-brokered peace negotiations between the Syrian government and the

coalition, as the latter's already-limited influence continues to erode.  
"Seven Syrian Islamist rebel groups form new Islamic Front," [Washington Post](#), 22 Nov 2013.

Also see "Islamists unite to form largest Syrian rebel alliance," [france24.com](#); "Powerful Rebel Groups in Syria Announce Creation of Umbrella Alliance," [NY Times](#), both 22 Nov 2013.

On 23 Nov, *Al-Arabiya* reported:

According to Abu Firas [Liwa al-Tawhid spokesman], the groups merging their troops, estimated at 45,000, were Liwa al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham, the Army of Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Haq and the Ansar al-Sham battalions.

All the groups are Islamist and merged "under the banner of 'There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet'," said Abu Firas, citing the Islamic profession of faith.

....

"It has been decided that all the factions' military, media, humanitarian and administrative offices will merge over a transitional period of three months," [Abu Firas] added.

....

The spokesman also said the Islamic Front wouldn't have relations with the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition. That coalition has seen its influence erode as rebels move away from the Turkish-based group [the Coalition] toward generous Gulf donors. "Key Syrian rebel groups merge," [Al-Arabiya](#), 23 Nov 2013.

I comment that the strengthening of the Islamic jihadists is bad news for everyone who wants to see a secular, religiously tolerant government continue in Syria. And improved organization of Islamic jihadists is bad news for Assad's legitimate government. It is too early to tell what effect this merger will have on the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Coalition, but those two organizations now appear less significant than before the merger.

With the merger of the jihadists, and the formidable presence of two Al-Qaeda groups in Syria, along with the incompetence of the Coalition, Assad is looking better and better. Unfortunately, the Sunni leaders of Arab nations, as well as diplomats in Western Europe and the USA, have been condemning Assad for more than two years. It would be very difficult for Western Europe and the USA to now endorse Assad.

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**25 Nov 2013**  
**Geneva2 finally scheduled**

On Monday morning, 25 Nov 2013, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced that the Geneva2 conference would be held on 22 Jan 2014. This will be the first

time that the Syrian government has met with any of the rebel leaders since the civil war began in March 2011. [france24.com](#), 11:33 GMT; [Associated Press](#), 12:26 GMT; [Reuters](#), 13:50 GMT, all 25 Nov 2013.

The announcement to journalists by the Secretary General at the UN Headquarters in New York City said:

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you will have seen by now, earlier this morning, I was pleased to announce that the Geneva conference on Syria will take place on Wednesday, January 22, 2014.

At long last and for the first time, the Syrian Government and opposition will meet at the negotiating table instead of the battlefield.

....

And we have a clear goal: the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, including the establishment, based on mutual consent, of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, including over military and security entities.

The fighting has raged on far too long — with more than 100,000 dead, almost nine million driven from their homes, countless missing and detained, and terrible violations of human rights.

The war continues to send tremors through the region and has forced unacceptable burdens on Syria's neighbours.

I expect all partners and parties to demonstrate their support for constructive negotiations. All must show vision and leadership.

Even though the conference will take place in about eight weeks, all parties can and must begin now to take steps to help the Geneva conference succeed, including toward the cessation of violence, humanitarian access, release of detainees and return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people to their homes.

As I have repeatedly said, the only way to truly end the violence and suffering is through an inclusive Syrian-led political process.

The war in Syria remains the world's biggest threat to international peace and security. "Secretary-General's press encounter on Syria," [UN](#), 25 Nov 2013. See also the news release: "Geneva conference on Syria set for January, UN chief announces," [UN](#), 25 Nov 2013.

In the afternoon, Brahimi held a press conference in Geneva, after his meeting with diplomats from Russia and the USA.

**JSRS [Joint Special Representative of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria]:** .... As you know, we have agreed on the date for the conference. It

will be the 22nd of January here in Geneva. We are still discussing the complete list of participants, and we will be meeting again on the 20th of December for another trilateral, maybe the last one before the conference. We are in touch both with the Government and with the opposition. We are asking them to name their delegations as early as possible, hopefully before the end of the year, because I think it's important that we meet them and speak to them, and listen to them, because this conference is really for the Syrians to come to Geneva, to talk to one another, and hopefully start a credible, workable, effective peace process for their country.

....

**Q:** The Geneva Communiqué states there must be a ceasefire. Can you tell us what plans you have for a ceasefire? Would that have to happen before 22 January, or on January 22 or at some date afterwards?

**JSRS:** I'm not sure whether that is what the Geneva Communiqué says but certainly we strongly appeal to the parties that since they are coming to this conference, this is, as the Secretary-General said today, it is a huge opportunity for peace that should not be wasted. This being so, we very strongly appeal to the Syrian government and the opposition not to wait for the conference, to do some confidence-building measures, diminish the violence, release prisoners and detainees of all sorts. You know, these two bishops that have been kidnapped, why are there still kept? As far as I know, they are not even asking for anything to release them. So I hope that, we appeal to them. But being realistic, a lot of the things that need to happen will happen after the conference starts, not before the conference starts.

**Q:** The British Foreign Secretary has said that the opposition would be represented by the Syrian National Coalition. Could you confirm that or not?

**JSRS:** What I confirm is that the National Coalition will play a very important role in forming the delegation but I have always said that the delegation has to be credible and representative, as representative as possible. Not all the people who want to come to Geneva will be able to come but they should know that this is not an event, this is a process. And in this process, I am sure that everybody who wants to participate in rebuilding what I call the new republic of Syria will be able to do so in the course of the process.

**Q:** [Unofficial translation from Arabic] Did you talk about the transitional government and what its powers will be, and what will the role of the security apparatus and the Syrian army under this government?

**JSRS:** [Unofficial translation from Arabic] We have said that the conference will start without any preconditions and also that all issues will be on the table once the conference opens. There is no doubt that the formation of the transitional ruling authority is one of the most important issues that has to be agreed upon in the conference. The transitional ruling authority is agreed upon in the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June last year: that it will have complete powers and that these

powers will be determined by the parties when we meet, God willing.

"Transcript of press conference by Joint Special Representative for Syria (JSRS) Lakhdar Brahimi[,] Geneva, 25 November 2013" [UN.ch](#), 25 Nov 2013.

The Associated Press published an interesting perspective which says:

Within 24 hours of an interim deal aimed at reining in Iran's nuclear program, world powers raised hopes Monday for the first face-to-face talks to end the Syrian civil war as the United Nations called the warring parties to the table.

But huge gaps remain. The opposition remains vague on whether it will even attend the Geneva conference called for Jan. 22, and both sides hold fundamentally different visions on the very basics, particularly the future role of President Bashar Assad.

....

Enormous challenges lie ahead. Even participation by both sides is by no means guaranteed.

Under pressure from the U.S., the Syrian National Coalition has dropped conditions that Assad step down before any talks and has eased demands for guarantees ahead of time that he will not be part of any transitional government — demands that the Syrian government has roundly rejected.

But the coalition is sticking to its condition that Assad release detainees and allow humanitarian corridors to provide access for desperately needed aid to rebel-held areas.

"These are trust-building measures that need to take place ahead of any talks, otherwise all efforts to convene a peace conference are futile," Sieda [of the Syrian National Coalition] said.

Previous attempts to bring Syria's warring sides together have failed miserably, mainly because of disputes over who should represent the opposition and the government, as well as whether Iran, Saudi Arabia and other regional powers should be at the table, and — above all — whether Assad will remain in office in the future.

Syrian officials say Assad, whose troops currently hold momentum on the ground in Syria, will not surrender power and may even run again in elections due in mid-2014.

The opposition says Assad cannot be part of any transition.

Zeina Karam and John Heilprin, "Syria Talks Aim To Build On Momentum Of Iran Deal," [Associated Press](#), 17:38 EST, 25 Nov 2013.

*Al-Jazeera* was more pessimistic:

However Laui Safi, a spokesman for the opposition Syrian National Coalition, said shortly after the announcement that the group would only attend if the Syrian regime met its preconditions: the release of prisoners and relief for besieged towns, and that the current president, Bashar al-Assad, has no part to play in the new transitional government.

The SNC has also said it would need the support of all rebel brigades on the ground, including al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, before it began peace talks.

Al Jazeera's diplomatic editor, James Bays, said that setting a date was no guarantee that talks would go ahead, and was announced more out of frustration than a clear plan.

"The UN has tried to coax the opposition to the table previously. When that didn't work, they have had to set a date to try to force them to the table. Delegations will probably attend, but will they represent those on the ground? Probably not[.]"

....

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr said that the Assad regime was itself emboldened, had the upper hand on the ground militarily, and felt strengthened by Iran, its main ally, returning to the international fold following the agreement to suspend its nuclear programme in return for easing of sanctions.

"UN sets January date for Syria peace talks," [Al-Jazeera](#), 25 Nov 2013.

**My comments:** Russia and the USA have been trying to schedule Geneva2 since 7 May 2013. The eight-month delay from 22 May to 22 Jan comes at a price of 40,000 dead Syrians (assuming 5000 dead/month). Apparently this price is acceptable to the Syrian National Coalition, whose intransigence was responsible for the delay. (Recall that back in May, Assad's government was willing to attend Geneva2. [france24.com](#), 24 May 2013; [Associated Press](#), 29 May 2013. As documented above, the Coalition has *not yet* publicly committed to its unconditional attendance at Geneva2.)

I am surprised that such an important conference (to resolve what Mr. Ban called "the world's biggest threat to ... peace and security") with so-many difficult issues is scheduled for only one day. As an attorney, I have seen arbitration of a commercial contract dispute take three days to resolve, where there were only two parties and only two relatively simple issues (Who breached the contract? What is the remedy for the breach?).

I am surprised that Brahimi did not remember that Geneva1 called for a ceasefire.

The Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 (Geneva1) was the product of a meeting where *both* the Syrian government *and* the Syrian rebels were absent. I think it is unfair to impose the results of Geneva1 on Syria. Nonetheless, here is a summary of what was decided in Geneva1 (paragraph 5):

1. "a sustained cessation of armed violence", i.e., a ceasefire
2. "release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons, and persons involved in peaceful political activities"
3. "freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists"
4. "Respecting freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed."
5. "all parties must show full respect for UNSMIS' [United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria] safety and security and fully cooperate with and facilitate the Mission in all

respects."

6. "allow immediate and full humanitarian access to humanitarian organizations to all areas affected by the fighting."

[Communiqué](#), 30 June 2012.

Note that (2) and (6) are essentially the same as two of the preconditions demanded by the Syrian National Coalition on [11 Nov](#).

Secretary General Ban and Brahimi both said there are "no preconditions" to Geneva2. But Ban also called for a "cessation of violence, humanitarian access, release of detainees[,] and return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people to their homes." Similarly, Brahimi said: "we very strongly appeal to the Syrian government and the opposition not to wait for the conference, to do some confidence-building measures, diminish the violence, release prisoners and detainees of all sorts." It seems to me that the six results specified in Geneva1 are preconditions for Geneva2, even if they are now called "confidence-building measures". Establishing preconditions invites bickering at Geneva2 over who was responsible for violating the preconditions, instead of focusing on forming a transitional government for Syria. Establishing preconditions also give each party an excuse not to attend Geneva2, because some precondition was *not* satisfied.

Ban wants Syrian refugees to return to their homes. Are their homes still standing? Photographs in news media show many residential districts in Syria have been reduced to rubble.

Paragraph 6 of the Geneva1 Communiqué says: "There is no room for sectarianism or discrimination on ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other grounds. Numerically smaller communities must be assured that their rights will be respected." That can *not* be acceptable to either the jihadists or Al-Qaeda, all of whom want to establish a government based on the Sunni Islam religion. It appears that Geneva2 may be between Assad's government and the Coalition, and ignore both the jihadists and Al-Qaeda. No one seems to have a plan for how to make the jihadis and Al-Qaeda disappear from Syria.

By holding Geneva2 about two months from now — instead of two or three weeks from now — the United Nations has given Assad's government, the rebels, the jihadists, and Al-Qaeda more time to slaughter each other, as well as kill innocent civilians. But delay is necessary, because the rebels are both (1) unable to decide whether to attend Geneva2 *and* (2) unable to appoint people to represent the rebels at Geneva2. There are also unresolved problems about whether Iran and Saudi Arabia should attend Geneva2.

Finally, about the naysayers amongst commentators, journalists, and diplomats — one must have some optimism that new ideas are worth trying. Listening to naysayers is a recipe for stagnation and failure. Does anyone want to see the death toll in the Syria civil war go past a quarter-million people? (This is *not* hyperbole: we are already half-way to a total of a quarter-million dead.) When do the rebels, jihadists, and Al-Qaeda stop fighting and start a political process?

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**my comment:  
Abandon Transitional Government?**

The peace process might be simplified if the United Nations — and the London11, especially USA, UK, and France — abandoned the transitional government specified in Geneva1, and concentrated on:

1. establishing a ceasefire (i.e., item 1 in Geneva1)
2. some corrections and supervision of Assad's government (e.g., items 2-6 in Geneva1)
3. stop munitions shipments from foreign nations to rebels, jihadists, and Al-Qaeda — to end any hope of a military victory by these fighters
4. free and fair elections in Syria (and also amongst the Syrian refugees in neighboring nations?) in mid-2014
5. consider establishing a national legislature in Syria to provide "checks and balances" on the president, and to provide a source of future presidential candidates. Consider appointing some former rebels to the initial legislature, provided each of them swears to renounce violence and revolution.
6. considering establishing a limit of two-terms on presidents of Syria, with the first term under this limit to begin in 2014. That way Assad can remain in power for two more terms (if voters re-elect Assad), while a pool of potential presidential candidates are prepared.

The United Nations has enough on its agenda without also creating a transitional government. Further it is wrong for outside meddlers to impose a new government on Syria. Let the people of Syria choose their own leaders in elections! Make small changes in the existing government, instead of replacing the existing government with a totally new, transitional government.

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**26 Nov 2013  
Free Syrian Army says "NO!"**

On 26 Nov, Ahmad al-Jarba, chief of the Syrian National Coalition, said: "We did not make a final decision yet on our participation in the Geneva conference." [Associated Press](#), 16:28 GMT, 26 Nov; [Al-Jazeera](#), 26 Nov 2013. Looking back at the Coalition's statement on the morning of 11 Nov, Jarba is correct.

One day after the United Nations' call for a ceasefire in Syria, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) — which is affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition — responded by saying there would be *no* ceasefire, not even during negotiations on 22 Jan. The head of the FSA, General Salim Idriss, told *Al-Jazeera*: "We will not stop combat at all during the Geneva conference or after it, and what concerns us is getting needed weapons for our fighters." The FSA also refused to attend Geneva2, as Gen. Idriss said: "Conditions are not suitable for running the Geneva II talks at the given date and we, as a military and revolutionary force, will not participate in the conference." [Al-Jazeera](#), 26 Nov; [Reuters](#), 10:23 GMT, 26 Nov; [france24.com](#), 26 Nov 2013; [Al-Jazeera](#), 26 Nov 2013.

Note that the FSA are the so-called moderate rebels, who are supported by the USA and

Europe. The jihadists and Al-Qaeda are even more belligerent than the FSA. In a nutshell, this is why peace negotiations in Syria are *futile*.

On 27 Oct 2013, one group of jihadists declared it would be "treason" to attend Geneva2, unless Assad were removed from power. On 29 Nov, [france24.com](http://france24.com) says "Salafist-leaning groups — which are cooperating with al Qaeda-allied factions such as the al-Nusra Front and the ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) — are now united in their rejection of any political solution to the Syrian conflict that would include President Bashar al-Assad's regime." [france24.com](http://france24.com).

**My opinion:** I remind the reader that the Syrian civil war is a *religious* civil war, between Shiite Muslims and Sunni Muslims. As the religious aspect intensifies, each side sees the others are infidels, worthy of extermination. And Christians and Jews — looking at Syria from the outside — see both sides as *unreasonable*, intransigent, barbaric (i.e., violating international norms for war), and perpetrating atrocities (e.g., terrorism).

On 20 Nov, Turkish President Abdullah Gül said in a speech that violence and terrorism in the name of Islam was causing Islamophobia. Gül concluded "there is no room for terrorism in Islam". [france24.com](http://france24.com) But such rational thoughts by Gül have no effect on the Coalition or FSA, and certainly no effect on the jihadists or Al-Qaeda. What is needed is intense, uniform, and sustained criticism by leading Muslim clerics, both Shiite and Sunni, but that has not happened. The absence of criticism of religious civil wars by leading Muslim clerics looks to outsiders as approval of such religious civil wars.

This intransigence and belligerence by the rebels, jihadists, and Al-Qaeda in Syria must be terribly exasperating to Ban and Brahimi, who are trying to organize peace negotiations.

An editorial in *Arab News*, published in Saudi Arabia, concludes:

The real losers in all this are the Syrian people. . . . . Sectarian killings have become the norm and Al-Qaeda linked groups are making gains in many regions.

Geneva 2 will not end the conflict. It will further erode any influence the exiled opposition has on the ground. The regime may even receive support as it battles the extremists. The Syrian uprising is over as Syria turns into a battlefield between extremists and moderates. Geneva 2 could pave the way for the rehabilitation of the Assad regime at a time when US attention is shifting toward concluding a historical deal with Iran over its nuclear program.

Osama Al Sharif, "Geneva 2 will not bring an end to Syria's ordeal," [Arab News](http://Arab News), 27 Nov 2013.

[Earlier](#) in this essay, I extolled Assad's ability to exert strong leadership, while the Coalition is disorganized, fragmented, and unable to make simple decisions. As I said above, Assad is our best hope of defeating the jihadists and Al-Qaeda. And Assad [represents](#) a continuation of a secular government that is tolerant of religious minorities. If foreign nations (i.e., outside meddlers) apply this analysis, they may agree with Al-Sharif that Assad should be "rehabilitated" by the international community.

On 3 Dec 2013, *Arab News* had a terse remark:

[Brahimi] said opposing Syrian groups still seem to be unwilling to reach a ceasefire ahead of the Geneva talks.

"Brahimi: Syria could be a new Somalia," [Arab News](#), 12:27 GMT, 3 Dec 2013.

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**27 Nov 2013**

**Assad agrees to attend Geneva2**

On 27 Nov 2013, the Associated Press reports:

The Syrian government said Wednesday [27 Nov] it will participate in U.N.-sponsored peace talks aimed at ending the country's civil war, but insisted that it is not going to the conference to hand over power.

....

In a statement Wednesday [27 Nov], Syria's Foreign Ministry confirmed the government will attend, saying Assad will send an official delegation to the Geneva conference. The ministry stressed that the representatives "will be going to Geneva not to hand over power to anyone" but to meet with those "who support a political solution for Syria's future."

The Syrian opposition and its Western supporters insist that Assad cannot be part of a transitional government.

In a jab at Britain and France, the Foreign Ministry said that if Paris and London "insist on holding fast to these illusions" that there is no place for Assad in a transitional period, then "there is no need for them to attend Geneva 2."

"Our people will not allow anyone to steal their right to decide their future and leadership and the main goal of the Geneva conference is to fulfill the interests of the Syrian people alone, and not those who shed their blood," the statement said.

"Syria says it won't give up power in peace talks," [Associated Press](#), 12:03 GMT, 27 Nov 2013.

Agence France-Press reports:

"Syria announces the participation of an official delegation under the orders of (Assad) and the demands of the Syrian people, with the top priority eliminating terrorism," the source was quoted as saying by the official SANA news agency.

....

The ministry source also said the delegation was not going to Geneva to hand over power, and that the condition stipulated by Syria's opposition and the West that Assad must not have a role in the country's future was out of the question.

"The official Syrian delegation will not go to Geneva to hand over power, but to take part (in talks) along with those who are committed to furthering the interests of the

Syrian people and who support a political solution for Syria's future," the source said.

"Our people will not allow anyone to steal their right to choose their future and their leaders, and what is key about Geneva is to assert the Syrians' rights, and not of those who are spilling the people's blood."

The source criticised "the French, British and other foreign ministries as well as their agents in the Arab world who have insisted that there can be no place for President Assad in the transitional period.

"The ministry reminds them that the age of colonialism is over, and they need to wake up... Otherwise it will be useless for them to attend Geneva II."

"Syria says delegates to attend Geneva under Assad orders," [france24.com](http://france24.com), 12:39, 27 Nov 2013.

See also: [Al-Jazeera](#), [Al-Arabiya](#), both on 27 Nov 2013; and [Arab News](#), 28 Nov 2013.

On 4 Dec 2013, journalists reported that Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zohbi said Assad insisted on leading the transitional government that would be imposed by Geneva2. Al-Bawaba translated the Information Minister's words: "The decision rests with President Assad. He will lead the period of transition, if there is one. He is the leader of Syria... And he will remain the president of Syria." I wonder why we need a transitional government, if Assad will be in charge? Why not just continue Assad's regular government? The Syrian government appears *not* to understand that the purpose of the transitional government is to remove Assad from power. See the following stories published on 4 Dec 2013:

- "Assad 'to remain' president in transition," [Al-Jazeera](#);
- "Assad firm on leading during Syria's transition," [Al-Bawaba](#);
- "Syria says Assad will remain in power," [Al-Arabiya](#);
- [Reuters](#).

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**27 Nov 2013**

### **Coalition agrees to attend Geneva2, but ....**

At night on 27 Nov, the Syrian National Coalition announced it will attend Geneva2, but the Coalition demands that Assad play no part in the future of Syria. The Associated Press reports:

The main Western-backed Syrian opposition group also said it is ready to attend. "We have presented in our last coalition meeting a clear complete vision regarding going to Geneva 2 (the conference) and it was approved with the consensus of the coalition and now we are ready within this spirit to go to Geneva 2," Ahmad al-Jarba, chief of the Syrian National Coalition, told reporters.

The group had earlier indicated that it was going but also said it required confidence-building measures, including humanitarian corridors to besieged rebel areas and the

release of political prisoners.

Al-Jarba reiterated the coalition's stance that it sees the conference as leading to a transitional government. The Syrian opposition and its Western supporters insist that Assad cannot be part of such a government.

....

Al-Jarba said his group rejects Iran's participation in the conference, unless it withdraws forces fighting on Assad's behalf. The Iranian-allied Lebanese Hezbollah group has backed Assad's troops. Iran's Revolutionary Guard has said it has high-level advisers in Syria but denied having fighters there.

Albert Aji and Steve Negus, "Syria, Opposition Both Confirm Presence At Talks," [Associated Press](#), 23:01 GMT, 27 Nov 2013.

Reuters reports:

The Syrian National Coalition opposition group will attend the long-delayed "Geneva 2" talks in January aimed at ending the country's civil war, the group's president, Ahmad Jarba, said on Wednesday [27 Nov].

In an interview with Reuters and the Associated Press, he also said regional power Iran should only be allowed to attend if it stopped taking part in the bloodshed in Syria and withdrew its forces and proxies.

The coalition said previously it was ready to attend if humanitarian aid corridors were set up and political prisoners released. It insists that President Bashar al-Assad can play no future role in Syria.

"We are now ready to go to Geneva," Jarba said on a visit to Cairo, adding that the opposition viewed the Geneva talks as a step to a leadership transition and a "genuine democratic transformation in Syria".

"There is no way that the individual responsible for the destruction of the country can be responsible for building the country," said Jarba, referring to Assad.

Michael Georgy, "Syrian opposition to attend Geneva peace conference," [Reuters](#), 22:52 GMT, 27 Nov 2013.

Copy at [Al-Arabiya](#).

**My comments:** The Syrian National Coalition has not really agreed to attend when it establishes preconditions (e.g., humanitarian aid corridors, release of political prisoners) and also when it demands that Assad have no role in the future of Syria. Demanding that Assad have no role achieves by blatant demand what the rebels were unable to accomplish in 32 months of fighting.

Jarba's view that Assad is "the individual responsible for the destruction of the country" is propaganda. The truth is that Assad is the lawful president of Syria, having been elected in 2007. Assad could equally claim that it was the rebels who engaged the lawful government in

battles that led to the destruction of Syria. Assad can reasonably claim he is fighting to maintain law-and-order, to defeat terrorists, and to continue a secular government in Syria.

Under Jarba's flawed logic, *anyone* who has some responsibility for the destruction of Syria should be banned from a future government of Syria. That includes Assad, the rebels, the Coalition, the jihadists, *and* Al-Qaeda. Jarba's flawed logic could also exclude from Geneva2 any foreign nation that supplied munitions for use in Syria, because those munitions contributed to destroying Syria.

From my perspective, Assad's initial overreaction to protests in March 2011 led to a rapid escalation by the rebels, and then turned into a religious civil war. It is now pointless to argue about (1) who started the war and (2) who is responsible for the "destruction" of Syria. Such questions will be answered in the future by historians. But it seems likely that each party to the civil war has at least some responsibility for destruction of part of Syria.

*The people of Syria really need a ceasefire now*, followed by political negotiations. Ban and Brahimi have called for a ceasefire. The Free Syrian Army immediately refused any ceasefire. Both Assad and the Syrian National Coalition have ignored the need for a ceasefire.

Jarba has no credibility as a leader. His Coalition took six months (May to November) to decide whether to attend Geneva2. The other rebels leaders have even less credibility. The jihadists and Al-Qaeda groups have good experience in leadership, but their ideology is repugnant.

On the other hand, Assad is an experienced leader, who has a proven ability to make decisions. Assad is Syria's best hope of defeating the jihadis and Al-Qaeda. Assad is Syria's best hope of restoring Syria's economy to where it was in 2010, before the civil war.

This demand of the London11 and the Coalition that Assad have no place in the future of Syria should be fatal to establishing a transitional government at Geneva2, because neither Assad nor the Coalition will yield on the issue of Assad's future. But, as I suggested [above](#), failing to establish a transitional government may be a good thing. Failing to establish a transitional government would leave Assad in place to fight jihadists and Al-Qaeda.

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**25-27 Nov 2013**

### **Foreign Meddlers Want Assad Out**

On 25 Nov, Kerry greeted the news that Geneva2 had been scheduled for 22 Jan. Part of Kerry's remarks said:

The conference on January 22 is the best opportunity to implement the Geneva Communiqué and form a new transitional governing body through mutual consent — an important step toward ending the suffering of the Syrian people and the destabilizing impact of this conflict on the region.

.... Now, in order to end the bloodshed and give the Syrian people a chance to meet

their long-deferred aspirations, Syria needs new leadership.  
John Kerry, "Geneva Conference on Syria," [State Dept.](#), 25 Nov 2013.

The U.S. President's Deputy Press Secretary said:

Q: Josh, does the President still believe that Bashar Assad needs to go, cannot continue ruling the government of Syria?

[Josh Earnest]: The President does still believe that, and, more importantly, the Syrian people believe that. That is the goal of these talks that are scheduled for Geneva in January. There should be an opportunity here for a political transition. It's our view that that's the only way that we can resolve this conflict. And we're hopeful that by bringing both sides to the table, we can get started on that process.

....

So there's a lot of work that needs to be done. It will start with this Geneva Conference, and will necessarily need to end with Assad leaving power.

"Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest Aboard Air Force One en route San Francisco, California," [White House](#), 25 Nov 2013.

I comment that no one has asked the Syrian people what they believe, or who they want as their president. Josh attributing President Obama's personal choice to "the Syrian people" is pure propaganda.

The press spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department was more blunt:

QUESTION: Do you continue to stick to the position that you have had for a very long time now — what, a year and a half — that from your point of view, a transitional governing authority formed by mutual consent of the opposition and the current government could not include President Assad because the opposition would never give its consent to that?

MS. PSAKI: That's right, and it's their choice to make. However, it's worth adding that our view continues to be that a leader who kills over 100,000 of his own people has no legitimacy. And we've also seen horrific reports that the regime is intentionally blocking the delivery of food and medicine to rebel-held areas, resulting in the starving of women and children. So it's hard to see how he would have a role in the future of Syria.

[Daily Press Briefing](#), 27 Nov 2013.

I comment that the *people* of Syria should choose their leader in elections, instead of having the USA and the Syrian National Coalition declare that Assad is *not* acceptable. Some of the dead Syrians were killed by rebels, jihadists, and Al-Qaeda groups — it is *unfair* to blame the entire death toll on Assad.

The USA, UK, France (and other members of London11) have been very clear that Assad will have absolutely no role in the future of Syria. The 22 Oct 2013 Communiqué from London11 says explicitly:

We agree that when the TGB [Transitional Governing Body] is established, Assad [ — ] and his close associates with blood on their hands [ — ] will have no role in Syria. Second paragraph of the London11 [Communiqué](#), 22 Oct 2013. For a discussion of the 22 Oct meeting, see [above](#).

On 26 Nov, French Foreign Affairs Minister Laurent said that Assad would not personally attend Geneva2, but Assad's government would be represented at Geneva2.

"The purpose of Geneva II is not to have an armchair discussion about Syria, it's to have mutual agreement between regime representatives, without Assad, and the moderate opposition in order to form a transitional government," Laurent Fabius told French radio. "It's very difficult but it's the only solution that allows us at once not to have Mr Bashar al-Assad and not to have the terrorists."

"Assad to be kept out of Syria peace talks, France," [RFI](#), 26 Nov 2013. See also [RIA-Novosti](#), 26 Nov 2013.

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### 28 Nov 2013 Rebels "Disillusioned"

*The New York Times* reports on 28 Nov that many of the Syrians who initially joined the rebels have quit, because of disillusionment with the rebels. One former rebel said his commanders "focus on enriching themselves", and he said called his commanders "do not want this war to end". *The Times* says Syrians are leaving the rebels for different reasons: "... some disillusioned with the growing power of Islamists among rebels, some complaining of corruption, others just exhausted with a conflict that shows no signs of abating." Elsewhere in the article, *The Times* gives more reasons: "the disarray and division on their [i.e., the rebels'] side, the government's deft exploitation of their mistakes, and a growing sense that there is no happy ending in sight." However, despite their disillusionment of the rebels, "none interviewed say they are willing to return to [Assad's] fold." Anne Barnard, Mohammad Ghannam, and Hwaida Saad, "Disillusionment Grows Among Syrian Opposition as Fighting Drags On," [NY Times](#), 28 Nov 2013.

Copy at [The Age](#) in Australia, 30 Nov 2013.

My comment is that Syria is becoming increasingly polarized, amongst supporters of Assad, the rebels, the jihadists, and Al-Qaeda. The longer we wait for a ceasefire, the more polarization, and the more difficult to reintegrate Syria. The failure of Western Civilization to supply substantial amounts of weapons and ammunition to the Free Syrian Army, *and* the failure of Obama to use cruise missiles against Assad on 31 Aug 2013, were previously reported to cause disillusionment amongst the rebels, as they realized they were not attracting support.

On 26 Nov 2013, Kim Sengupta, the Defense Correspondent at *The Independent* newspaper in the UK, notes how the moderate rebels have collapsed, and Al-Qaeda is now the major enemy of Assad's government. The editorial concludes: "The moderate fighters in Syria, meanwhile, feel that they have been abandoned by the West where public opinion increasingly sees all the rebels as extremists. The West has ensured that Bashar al-Assad has got the enemy he wanted." Kim Sengupta, "As the West looks away, the Islamists claim



Syria's rebellion for themselves," [The Independent](#), 26 Nov 2013.

So with a choice between Assad and Al-Qaeda, are the London11 nations smart enough to support Assad?

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### **Rebels Fragmented**

On 2 Dec, the Associated Press reported about the fragmentation and disorganization of the rebels in Syria:

Within minutes of opening a Twitter account this past week, the leader of Syria's main Western-backed opposition group received an onslaught of criticism.

"Welcome to Twitter Mr. Western Puppet," one comment to Ahmad al-Jarba read. Others called him a Saudi stooge and scorned the opposition's perceived ineffectiveness.

The comments reflect the deep disillusionment and distrust that many Syrians have come to feel toward the Syrian National Coalition, Syria's main opposition group in exile. They also underline the predicament of who will represent the Syrian opposition at an upcoming peace conference in Geneva marking the first face-to-face meeting between Syria's warring sides.

....

The Syrian National Coalition is seen by many as a disparate group of out-of-touch exiles with inflated egos and non-Syrian allegiances. Syrians often deride it as the "five-star-hotel opposition" for spending more time meeting in luxury hotels than being on the ground in Syria.

Damascus-based opposition groups call members of the coalition traitors for demanding U.S. military airstrikes against Syria following a chemical weapons attack in August that killed hundreds. But groups known as the "internal opposition" are themselves seen as aging and submissive to Assad's government, incapable of playing an effective opposition role for fear of arrest.

....

Hassan Abdul-Azim, a veteran opposition figure in Syria who leads the Syria-based National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, said his group was ready to go to Geneva with a unified delegation made up of internal and external opposition group. But he said the coalition rejected the idea because it considers itself the only legitimate representative.

Many smaller opposition groups, including Kurdish parties, have not decided whether they will go and who will represent them. The coalition has said it will meet in Istanbul in mid-December to discuss the makeup of the delegation. But members of the group itself are split on the whole concept of a peace conference. Some of its senior members

insist that Assad should step down and stand trial before any talks.  
Bassem Mroue, "Syrian Opposition Splintered Ahead Of Peace Talks," [Associated Press](#), 2 Dec 2013.

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### USA talks with Islamic Front

Some journalists reported that U.S. diplomats were talking with leaders of the Islamic Front. One specific goal is to encourage the Islamic Front to attend Geneva2 on 22 Jan 2014.

- "U.S., Allies Reach Out to Syria's Islamist Rebels," [Wall Street Journal](#), 20:43 EST, 3 Dec 2013;
- "US talking to Syria's Islamist rebels," [AFP](#), 4 Dec 2013;
- "U.S. seeks to better understand Syria Islamists," [Reuters](#), 22:00 GMT, 4 Dec 2013;
- "U.S. extends diplomatic hand to Syria's Islamist rebels," [Al-Bawaba](#), 05:59 GMT, 5 Dec 2013

My comment is that journalists agree that the Islamic Front now outnumbered the Free Syrian Army, which means the Free Syrian Army is increasingly less important in the civil war in Syria. The USA, amongst other Western nations, needs to recognize the reality that the jihadists and Al-Qaeda are now the principal fighters against Assad's government.

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### Free Syrian Army fighting against Al-Qaeda

The reality is that the two Al-Qaeda groups in Syria are increasingly powerful on the battlefield and increasing brutal (e.g., war crimes, beheadings, etc.). At the same time, the Free Syrian Army — the original rebel group — grows smaller and less important in the civil war. In this context, the leader of the Free Syrian Army considers a future shift in direction:

The spectre is looming of a second Syrian civil war with the head of the opposition's official forces declaring that he is prepared to join regime troops in the future to drive out al-Qa'ida-linked extremists who have taken over swathes of rebel-held territories. General Salim Idris, the commander of the Free Syrian Army warned that in particular Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), with thousands of foreign fighters in its ranks, was "very dangerous for the future of Syria" and needs to be confronted before it becomes even more powerful.

....

Speaking in Istanbul, General Idris, a former officer in the regime's army, said he and his associates were dropping the precondition that Bashar al-Assad must leave power before the Geneva meeting takes place. Instead they would be satisfied if his departure were to take place "at the end of the negotiation process" when General Idris will join forces with the remainder of the regime to mount an offensive against the Islamists.  
Kim Sengupta, "Syrian rebels consider joining forces with regime troops to fight al-Qa'ida," [The Independent](#), 3 Dec 2013.

See also: "Rebels may join govt forces," [Daily Star](#) in Lebanon, 6 Dec 2013.

Back on 23 Oct 2013 [above](#), my opinion was that an ideal solution would be for the rebels to [re-]join the Syrian military and fight against jihadists and Al-Qaeda. However, I thought that would *not* occur, because of more than two years of hatred and distrust between the rebels and the Syrian military. Further, the Syrian military is loyal to Assad, while the Free Syrian Army insists that Assad must be replaced.

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### 3-6 Dec 2013

On 22 Nov 2013, the Islamic Front was created, as described [above](#). On 3 Dec, the Islamic Front formally withdrew from the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army. [The Telegraph](#), 5 Dec 2013.

Later it was [reported](#) that the Islamic Front on 6 Dec seized a warehouse belonging to the Free Syrian Army. [Reuters](#), 7 Dec 2013.

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On 3 Dec, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the U.S. government had been meeting with Islamist (jihadist) militias in Syria. [Wall Street Journal](#).

On 4 Dec, Marie Harf, Deputy Spokesperson at the U.S. State Department said at a press briefing:

QUESTION: There's a report out today that the U.S. and its allies have held direct talks with key Islamist militias in Syria.

MS. HARF: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Can you comment on who those talks might be with?

[Ms. Harf]: Well, as we've talked about a lot in here, we engage with a broad cross section of Syrian people and political and military leaders in the opposition, including a variety of Islamist groups. We do not engage with terrorists, with groups we consider that are special — that are designated as terrorist organizations. We've talked about Al-Nusra in here quite a bit. As we've said, there's no military solution here, and there's a reality on the ground that there are a variety of groups that are part of the opposition and that we need to find ways to get all of these groups to accept the need for a political solution.

We work with General Idriss. Our assistance goes to the SMC and General Idriss. It doesn't go to other groups, but we — there's a reality that we need to work with these groups to get them to be a part of the political process, and that's exactly what's happening right now.

QUESTION: What would you say to those who say that this might be an acknowledgement that al-Qaida is gaining the upper hand there?

MS. HARF: That what is an acknowledgement that al-Qaida is gaining --

QUESTION: These talks.

MS. HARF: I don't think those two things are linked in any way intellectually.

QUESTION: Perhaps you could say — tell us when these talks began. My understanding is they've been going on for more than a year, and that this is --

MS. HARF: We've been engaging with a broad section for a long time. I can double check and see if there's a specific date.

QUESTION: Right. But it is not because — this isn't something new that you have decided to do because the militant — the al-Qaida-types are gaining strength, correct? It's something that's been going on for some --

MS. HARF: It's been ongoing.

QUESTION: -- for a long time.

MS. HARF: Of course we are incredibly concerned about the terrorist threat in Syria, about extremist elements within the opposition. We've made that very clear. That's why we talk to the opposition all the time about the fact that we don't recognize terrorist groups that are part of the opposition, and in fact encourage them not to work with them as well. So this is obviously a great concern to us. We've talked to countries in the region about countering the terrorist threat, but it's a reality that the opposition is made up of a number of groups and we have a responsibility to help, as we try to get a political solution, to get these groups to the table to, in fact, put that solution into practice. But we don't engage with groups we consider terrorists.

QUESTION: But what I'm trying to get at, or what I'm trying to understand 100 percent is that the discussions that you are having with moderate Islamist groups, the non-terrorist Islamist groups --

MS. HARF: Yep. Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- is — those weren't begun in response to the changes in the way — the situation on the battlefield. Is that correct?

MS. HARF: Well, I mean, that's a pretty broad statement. They — we engage with these groups --

QUESTION: Well, I think the question is — the question from my colleague before I think was: Are you doing this now — have you decided to do this now because of the way — because you fear that the radicals are gaining momentum on the battlefield, or was this something that has been going on for some time and is unrelated to conditions — to the battlefield?

MS. HARF: Well, you can't say anything's unrelated to conditions on the ground. That's sort of a silly thing to say. What it's in response to is the fact — is in response to a reality that the opposition is made up of a number of groups — some are Islamist groups — and that in order to get a political solution here because there is no military solution, we need to get these groups to the — to buy into the notion that there should be a military solution. And it's really in response --

QUESTION: No, no, no.

MS. HARF: Or a political solution, excuse me, sorry. I'm tripping over my words today. It's not a good day. [earlier she said: "I'm sorry. I have a cold. I still am not doing very well up here."] But no — but we need to get these groups to buy into the notion that there needs to be a political solution, and the way to do that is to engage with them. It's — that's what it's in response to, this notion that there is no military solution here. We're working towards Geneva II and we need to get these groups on board with that political solution.

QUESTION: Can you talk to specifically which groups you're talking to, or --

MS. HARF: Well, we're not going to get into specifics with every one of our meetings. We engage, again, with a broad section of folks, but we don't engage with designated foreign terrorist organizations.

QUESTION: But will these groups — will some of these groups, then, be represented, do you feel, at the Geneva II talks?

MS. HARF: Well, they're still, I know, working out what the delegations will look like, and it's up to them to inform the UN of what their delegations will look like. And actually, the story that was brought up — I believe in The Wall Street Journal — is that some of those groups that were mentioned there actually fall under the SMC. So it's not — this has been widely reported for a long time.

QUESTION: But you'd expect a delegation, once it's done, to be composed of a broad section and not a narrow section, presumably.

MS. HARF: Certainly that's our overall goal, but it's up to the opposition to decide what the composition of its delegation looks like.

QUESTION: Marie -- former Ambassador to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan Ryan Crocker has said today, "We need to start talking to the Assad regime again about counterterrorism and other issues of shared concern." He said ["]it will have to be done very quietly, but bad as Assad is, he is not as bad as the jihadis who would take over in his absence.["] Are you talking to the Assad regime or to President Assad regarding counterterrorism? And what do you think about what Ambassador Crocker has said?

MS. HARF: Well, no, we're not. I can answer that question very directly.

Obviously, the Administration and we are all very concerned about the terrorist threat in Syria. We discuss it with neighboring states. This is not a problem we can or should try to solve unilaterally. We're all going to need to work together on this. In conversations we've had, we found agreement among the neighboring states and other allies in the region that there is a problem and that we need to all take steps to counter it.

But let's also remember why these terrorists have been allowed to flourish in Syria. It's because of the situation the regime has created. Their brutality in responding to what began as a peaceful protest in Syria has created the conditions for al-Qaida-affiliated groups to flourish, to wreak havoc, and to undertake violent actions in Syria. So it is because of the regime's actions that they have been able to do so today. And again, we just — it's — that's not something that's happening. Greatly, obviously, respect Ambassador Crocker, but this is just where we are today and believe that, again, the best way forward here is a political solution, which is what we're working towards right now.

QUESTION: Did you mean that the Administration will not take Ambassador Crocker's advice into consideration?

MS. HARF: Again, we consider a wide range of opinions. But it's worth keeping in mind, again, the reason that these terrorists have been allowed to flourish. We're not having conversations with the Syrian authorities about counterterrorism. It's just — it's an interesting idea, but we are where we are, and I think that's probably all I have to say on that.

[State Dept.](#), 4 Dec 2013.

Ryan Crocker told *The New York Times*:

"We need to start talking to the Assad regime again" about counterterrorism and other issues of shared concern, said Ryan C. Crocker, a veteran diplomat who has served in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. "It will have to be done very, very quietly. But bad as Assad is, he is not as bad as the jihadis who would take over in his absence."

Robert F. Worth and Eric Schmitt, "Jihadist Groups Gain in Turmoil Across Middle East," [NY Times](#), 3 Dec 2013.

Reprinted in [Globe & Mail](#), 4 Dec 2013.

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### 9 Dec 2013

The Netherlands trained 17 members of the Syrian National Coalition for five days in negotiation tactics. [Associated Press](#), 9 Dec 2013.

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### 11 Dec 2013

The morning of 11 Dec, journalists reported that Islamic Front jihadists had captured

warehouses from the Free Syrian Army (i.e., Western-supported rebels) on 6 Dec. These captured warehouses were located near the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Turkey and northwest Syria. Consequently, the USA suspended deliveries of "nonlethal assistance" to the rebels located along the border with Turkey. Similarly, the United Kingdom also suspended nonlethal aid to the Free Syrian Army, until it is clear that such aid will *not* be acquired by jihadists. "White House: US Halting Nonlethal Syria Aid," [Associated Press](#), 14:15 EST, 11 Dec 2013; [Reuters](#); [Al-Jazeera](#); [Arab News](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); [BBC](#); all on 11 Dec 2013. [france24.com](#), 12 Dec 2013.

Principal Deputy Press Secretary at the White House, Josh Earnest, held a press briefing at 13:10 EST on 11 Dec, at which the following was said about the suspension of aid to the rebels in the Free Syrian Army:

**Question:** On a separate issue, reports today that the U.S. has halted all nonlethal aid to Syrian rebels operating in northern Syria — I'm wondering, is the U.S. losing faith in the ability of rebels to fight without Islamic extremist interference or participation?

**MR. EARNEST:** Well, Jim, as you know, a significant portion of our policy towards Syria has been dedicated to providing support to those elements of the opposition that are moderate, that are committed to respecting basic human rights, that are committed to respecting the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and even the political minorities in that country. So that has been a focal point of our efforts, particularly when it comes to the provision of nonlethal aid.

We have seen the reports that Islamic Front forces have seized the headquarters in question and warehouses belonging to the Supreme Military Council, and we're obviously concerned by those reports. We're still gathering facts and consulting with General Idris and the Supreme Military Council [SMC] staff to inventory the status of U.S. equipment and supplies that have been provided to the SMC.

As a result of this situation, as you pointed out, the United States has suspended all further deliveries of nonlethal assistance into northern Syria. At the same time, it's important for people to understand that our humanitarian assistance, which is distributed through international and nongovernmental organizations including the United Nations, is not affected by this suspension.

[White House](#) Press Briefing, 11 Dec 2013.

The Spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, Jen Psaki, held a press briefing at 13:45 EST on 11 Dec, at which the following was said about the suspension of aid to the rebels in the Free Syrian Army under the Supreme Military Council (SMC):

**Question:** Can we just start with Syria and the decision on the suspension of aid? ... can you explain exactly why this step has been taken and whether it means anything of significance for the SMC and the control that General Idris has over the Free Syria Army?

**MS. PSAKI:** Sure. Well, let me state first unequivocally it is not a suspension of aid or a holding back of aid. But let me outline for you what's happened here.

We're obviously concerned that Islamic Front forces have seized the Atmeh

headquarters and warehouses belonging to the SMC, and we are, of course, in close contact with General Idris and the SMC about these events. We're gathering the facts, consulting with friends in the Syrian opposition on the next steps we can do in support of the Syrian people. And as I mentioned, of course, we're working closely with General Idris and the SMC staff at this point to inventory the status of U.S. equipment and supplies provided to the SMC. As a result of this situation, the United States has suspended all deliveries of nonlethal assistance into northern Syria while we evaluate the situation on the ground and gather additional details.

....

... we've been working with the SMC. They are the group that we have — and we, with the international community, have designated as the coordinating group for military assistance and other assistance. We're, of course, evaluating what this means, what the impact is. But as you have seen in reports and you have all reported, the fact that the warehouse — the headquarters and warehouses belonging to the SMC have been taken over is certainly something concerning and has left us to, given that, suspend all deliveries at this point. We're evaluating it and we are, of course, taking an inventory of what it means and what supplies are applicable here.

**QUESTION:** All right. Well, recognizing that you don't have — well, how are you doing the inventory? But then recognizing that you haven't done the inventory yet, do you have any idea of how much and what is in these warehouses?

**MS. PSAKI:** Well, nonlethal assistance, as you know, could include — includes items like MREs [meals ready to eat], laptops, et cetera. In terms of what specifically was included in this warehouse, that is an ongoing process. I don't have an evaluation of that for all of you. I'm not sure we'll make a public evaluation. But certainly, we're working with the SMC. We are in close touch with General Idris as well as members of the SMC to undergo the process of reviewing what's included and what the impact would be.

....

**QUESTION:** All right. And then my last [question] is just — what does this say — the fact that apparently the SMC forces just ran away, what does that say about their viability or credibility as a fighting force and as a credible military opponent to either the Assad regime or to the al-Qaida-linked groups?

**MS. PSAKI:** Well, Matt, I know there have been a range of reports, many of them by many of your outlets. We're still evaluating what happened on the ground, so I wouldn't confirm or reiterate reports about what happened or what exactly went down on the ground.

This has nothing to do with our support for the SMC. It has nothing to do with our support for the opposition. It has everything to do with the security of the material assistance, which is, of course, what we're evaluating. But beyond that, I wouldn't want



to speculate about what happened or what it means until we have more time to consult with the people on the ground.

**QUESTION:** Have you any idea how long the suspension of aid might last?

**MS. PSAKI:** I don't. It's important — let me just reiterate, too — and I forgot to mention this in the beginning part — that assistance continues through other neighboring countries to other parts of Syria. So that's what I meant by it's not suspended. It's just for this particular part, given the circumstances.

....

**QUESTION:** How much of this has got to do with the political leadership battle between the SMC and this Islamic Front? I mean, as my colleagues did point out, this [Islamic Front?] is a group that you have been in talks with trying to convince them to come to the bargaining table. How much of this is something that you think could easily overcome through just discussions, or do you think that this is something much bigger?

**MS. PSAKI:** It's a good question, Lesley. I think it's too early to say at this point what this means and what — and how it will be resolved and what the best steps are to resolve it. That's obviously what we're endeavoring to determine with our contacts on the ground.

[State Dept.](#) Press Briefing, 11 Dec 2013.

The situation may be much worse than just capturing a warehouse. The Islamic Front is reported to have captured the headquarters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The commander of the FSA — General Idris — is reported to have fled from Syria to Turkey, and then to Qatar on 8 Dec. Adam Entous and Rima Abushakra, "Top U.S.-backed Commander in Syria Run Out, U.S. Officials Say," [Wall Street Journal](#), 21:53 EST, 11 Dec 2013. However, *The Wall Street Journal's* report that General Idris had "fled" was later disputed, as Idris was in Turkey for discussions with both the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front. [Al-Jazeera](#); [Russia Today](#); [Wall Street Journal](#) ("U.S. officials changed their account that the top Western-backed rebel commander in Syria fled his headquarters ...."), all on 12 Dec 2013.

The McClatchy Washington Bureau interpreted this suspension of aid:

U.S.-led efforts to foster a moderate rebel force in northern Syria appear to have collapsed with the announcement Wednesday [11 Dec] that the United States and Great Britain have stopped shipping aid to Western-backed fighters.

U.S. officials said they'd halted the provision of nonlethal supplies over the weekend after Islamist fighters seized a headquarters and warehouses belonging to the U.S.-allied Supreme Military Command, in a town near the Turkish border. That operation was the latest in a string of setbacks for the Western-backed forces, who've suffered from a lack of supplies, internal divisions and an exodus of fighters to better-equipped Islamist brigades.

Analysts who monitor the conflict said the U.S. decision shows the Obama administration is still struggling to identify a viable pro-democracy ally on a battlefield that's now dominated by al Qaida extremists and ultraconservative Islamist factions. Some interpreted the move as a sign that the Obama administration might even be moving toward a policy shift that would keep President Bashar Assad in place and focus on preventing al Qaida from becoming entrenched in northern Syria.

Hannah Allam And Mitchell Prothero, "U.S. halts aid to Syrian rebels in a sign search for moderate force has failed," [Miami Herald](#), 11 Dec 2013.

The *Los Angeles Times* noted:

The move [i.e., suspended delivery of non-lethal aid] appears to be the latest blow to the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, which has been increasingly overshadowed on the battlefield by hard-line Islamist insurgents, including several groups linked to Al Qaeda.

Patrick J. McDonnell and Nabih Bulos, "U.S., concerned about militants, suspends some Syrian rebel aid," [Los Angeles Times](#), 11 Dec 2013.

On 13 Dec, the Associated Press reported that the warehouse seized by the Islamic Front contained machine guns and ammunition, in addition to other supplies (e.g., night vision goggles, laptop computers and secure radios). [Washington Post](#), 13 Dec 2013. Western newsmidia minimized the contents of the warehouse. *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported "a senior FSA Supreme Military Council official speaking anonymously" said the warehouse contained "2,000 AK-47 rifles, 1,000 assorted arms — including M79 Osa rocket launchers, rocket-propelled grenades, and 14.5mm heavy machine guns — in addition to more than 200 tons of ammunition. At least 100 FSA military vehicles were also taken in the attack." [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), 11 Dec 2013. Reprinted at [AINA](#).

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### 12 Dec 2013

On 12 Dec 2013, it was announced that the first day (22 Jan) of the Geneva2 conference would be held in Montreux, Switzerland, because a previously scheduled exhibition of luxury wrist watches had already reserved many of the hotel rooms in Geneva.

A total of 32 nations had been invited to the 22 Jan 2014 Geneva2 conference, including the nations neighboring Syria; the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (i.e., USA, UK, France, Russia, and China); and Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Iran, ....

On 24 Jan 2014, there will be bilateral meetings in Geneva between the Syrian Government and the rebels, with each side sending nine people. There is no fixed end date for the bilateral negotiations.

- [Associated Press](#), 11:15 EST, 10 Dec;
- [france24.com](#), 17:19, 12 Dec 2013;
- [Al-Jazeera](#), 12 Dec;
- [Voice of Russia](#), 12 Dec;

- [Al-Arabiya](#), 13 Dec.
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### **Gen. Hayden's Possible Outcomes in Syria Assad the best choice to lead Syria**

*The Australian* reported U.S. retired General Michael Hayden (who was head of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency from 2006 until 2009) saw three possible outcomes in Syria:

1. "continuing conflict between ever more extreme Sunni and Shia factions"
2. "'dissolution of Syria' and the end of a single state within the borders defined by a 1916 treaty between the French and British empires"
3. victory by Assad.

General Hayden thought the second outcome was the most likely, while he personally preferred a victory by Assad, "as ugly as it sounds".

"Assad victory 'the best outcome'," [The Australian](#), 14 Dec 2013.

See also: [Global Post](#) (AFP) 12 Dec; [Voice of Russia](#), 13 Dec.

Note that Con Coughlin, at *The Telegraph*, also endorsed Assad as the best leader for Syria, back on [22 Oct](#). Former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, endorsed Assad in an interview with *The New York Times* on [3 Dec](#). Dan Halutz, former chief-of-staff of the Israeli Defense Force, prefers Assad to Al-Qaeda. ([Arutz Sheva](#), 11 Dec.) Clearly, Assad is becoming recognized as the best of various bad choices.

On 20 Dec, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov recognized this trend amongst Western politicians and diplomats. "West Understands That Assad Is Lesser Evil — Lavrov," [RIA-Novosti](#), [Reuters](#), [Al-Jazeera](#), all on 20 Dec 2013.

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**14-15 Dec 2013**

### **French, USA foreign ministers comment on Syria**

On 14 Dec, French Foreign Minister Fabius said he was "quite pessimistic" about the success of Geneva2 in January 2014: "Bashar al-Assad says he will send representatives to Geneva. While Mr Assad has a lot of faults, he is not an idiot ... we can't see why he would hand over all his powers. As for the opposition that we support, it is in great difficulty." The opposition supported by France is the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Coalition.

[The Telegraph](#), 15 Dec.

See also: [AFP](#), [BBC](#), both on 14 Dec 2013. [Al-Arabiya](#), [Al-Bawaba](#), both on 15 Dec 2013.

My comment is that the USA, France, UK, and other Western nations should be supporting Assad. During the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the USA supported tyrants because they opposed communism. Since 2000, we should consider supporting tyrants who oppose Islamic terrorism.

On 15 Dec, U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, appeared on the ABC television program "This Week":

QUESTION: The major news out of Syria this week: the U.S. has suspended nonlethal aid because Islamist rebels took over a warehouse.

SECRETARY KERRY: Yeah.

QUESTION: How did that happen?

SECRETARY KERRY: Well, it happened because there's a certain amount of infighting taking place within the opposition. And this is the nature of the beast that has been unleashed by Bashar al-Assad, who probably is feeding some of it himself because he likes to try to play the part that he is the better alternative to these extremists. So there are some indicators that he's even fueling some of that.

The problem is you have some radical Islamic elements there.

....

QUESTION: And you really think [Geneva2] is going to happen next month?

SECRETARY KERRY: We're committed to going. The Russians are committed to going. Countries are committed to going.

QUESTION: John McCain says: The moderate opposition groups are losing. As a result, extremists are filling the void, and entire sections of Syria, stretching deep into Iraq, are now effectively safe havens for al-Qaida. True?

SECRETARY KERRY: There's some truth — yeah, it's absolutely true. Al-Qaida has greater clout there than it had before, and it's an increasing threat. And it's a threat we're going to have to confront.

But John also understands that the members of Congress, with whom he serves, were not willing to put additional money in in order to fund overtly and put money into the opposition significantly.

[State Dept.](#), 15 Dec 2013.

See also [ABC](#), 15 Dec 2013.

Agence France-Presse reported that Kerry said Syria had become a "huge sectarian mess", although those words appear in neither the State Department transcript nor the ABC News transcript. [AFP](#), [Daily Star](#) in Lebanon, [Al-Jazeera](#), all on 15 Dec 2013.

Kerry says Assad "likes to try to play the part that he is the better alternative" — and it is true that Assad does play this part — but then Kerry makes the unsupported assertion that Assad is "fueling" the fighting between the rebels and jihadists. I have seen no report by journalists that suggests that Assad is fueling disputes between the rebels and jihadists. Because the

rebels and jihadists have some different goals, I would expect them to fight each other.

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**20 Dec 2013**

**Free Syrian Army welcomes Geneva2**

The Associated Press reported on the attitude of the leaders of the Free Syria Army and the Al-Nusra Front toward Geneva2:

Thursday night [19 Dec], Al-Jazeera TV aired what it said was an interview with Abu Mohammad al-Jolani — the first known interview with the leader of the al-Qaida linked Jabhat al-Nusra, or Nusra Front.

"Geneva is an attempt to resuscitate the regime," he said, vowing not to recognize any results from it.

Those who take part "do not represent the people who sacrificed with their blood" and are "accomplices in selling out the blood that has been shed," he said. He spoke on camera with his face concealed. Al-Jazeera did not give details on where and when the interview took place.

"We cannot allow the Geneva 2 game to fool the nation, to push us back 50 or 100 years," al-Golani added.

His comments were in sharp contrast to an appeal made by Idris [leader of the Western-backed Supreme Military Council] for all opposition fighters to join ranks, pledging to do everything he can to stave off rebel infighting.

In a statement, he said all rebels in Syria who believe in the "goals of the revolution" are "our brothers." He spoke after a meeting late Thursday in Istanbul with U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford.

The faction that Idris leads, the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army rebel umbrella group, has been dealt a severe blow by the rapid rise of Islamic extremist groups in Syria.

....

Idris has said he will take part in the Geneva talks, but it is still unclear if any other rebel groups will attend. Brahimi said he was told by the opposition that they would form their delegation in late December or early January.

Zeina Karam & John Heilprin, "Syrian Rebel Chief Urges Unity Ahead Of Talks," [Associated Press](#), 14:15 EST, 20 Dec 2013.

See also [Arab News](#), 21 Dec 2013.

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**Preparation for Geneva2**

On 20 Dec 2013, Brahimi met with diplomats from Russia and the USA to make final preparations for Geneva2. The USA objected to inviting Iran, but Brahimi did not rescind his invitation to Iran. [AFP](#); [BBC](#); [Associated Press](#); all on 20 Dec 2013.

Afterwards, Brahimi called the Foreign Minister of Iran, Mohammad Javad Zarif. Zarif is reported to have "insisted on a political solution" to the civil war in Syria. [AFP](#); [Al-Jazeera](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); [Tasnim](#) in Iran; [PressTV](#) in Iran; [FARS](#) in Iran; all on 21 Dec 2013.

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### **Britain rescinds second citizenship of Syrian jihadists**

Since May 2010, Britain has revoked the UK citizenship of 37 jihadists who are fighting in Syria. This means that these jihadists who formerly held dual citizenship will need to return to their home country, instead of return to the UK. Alice Ross, Patrick Galey, & Nigel Morris, "Exclusive: No way back for Britons who join the Syrian fight, says Theresa May," [The Independent](#), 23 Dec 2013.

See also: [Al-Bawaba](#); [Al-Arabiya](#).

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### **Jimmy Carter and Robert Pastor**

Jimmy Carter, U.S. President during 1977-81, and Prof. Robert Pastor of the American University wrote an opinion piece in *The Washington Post*:

On Nov. 26, the U.N. secretary general made another call for a Geneva peace conference on Syria, to be held Jan. 22. These calls have been issued since June 2011, but no belligerents have shown up because each has been allowed to define the preconditions for negotiations. The only way to break this stalemate is for the United Nations and major powers to set the conditions for participation and enforce them.

....

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's opponents have insisted that the goal of the Geneva conference is to replace his government, something he predictably rejects. His government demands that the increasingly fragmented opposition groups, all of whom it classifies as terrorists, put down their weapons before they can discuss peace. This stalemate explains why the latest call for negotiations in January is unlikely to succeed.

The United Nations has been fortunate to have two brilliant special envoys dealing with Syria — Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi — but they have not been permitted to use their negotiating skills because the principal actors insist on preconditions of victory rather than mutual accommodation essential to bringing the war to an end.

These preconditions aim to win an unwinnable war rather than to forge an imperfect peace, and in the process they deny the Syrian people their sovereign right to choose.

An alternative set of preconditions, difficult for all sides to accept, can lead toward

democracy and tolerance. This would require that global and regional actors take the first step and encourage their Syrian allies to take the next ones.

All actors will need to make hard compromises if they want to end the war. If they fail to take these difficult steps, the war may very well go on for another decade and likely create a wider circle of destruction and death.

We propose three principles on which to base the discussions in Geneva:

- **Self-determination:** The Syrian people should decide on the country's future government in a free election process under the unrestricted supervision of the international community and responsible nongovernmental organizations, with the results accepted if the elections are judged free and fair;
- **Respect:** The victors should assure and guarantee respect for all sectarian and minority groups; and
- **Peacekeepers:** To ensure that the first two goals are achieved, the international community must guarantee a robust peacekeeping force.

Any local, regional or global actors that accept these three preconditions should be welcomed to the Geneva negotiations.

These preconditions should not be controversial, but they mean that Syrian factions — and their supporters — would have to back down from their former unreasonable demands.

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An important first step is to create a credible, independent, nonpartisan election commission. A second important step is to build a security mechanism that would prevent any party from sabotaging the election or implementation of the results. We would need Russia and the United States to agree to this approach, Iran and other regional powers to stop supporting their proxies and the United Nations to elevate this issue to a top priority.

It is time to change the agenda, the preconditions and the strategy on Syria — and end the war.

Jimmy Carter & Robert A. Pastor, "Time to be bold and make peace in Syria," [Washington Post](#), 23 Dec 2013.

The international news media largely ignored this opinion piece by Carter and Pastor. A few exceptions are: [Al-Jazeera](#), [Kuwait News Agency](#), [Voice of America](#), all on 23 Dec 2013. Neither the Associated Press nor Reuters reported the opinion piece by Carter and Pastor.

The call for elections in Syria was previous made on [5 Nov 2013](#) by Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, a Syrian Presidential Advisor. Her call was ignored by everyone.

In my opinion, Carter and Pastor are absolutely correct to say "the principal actors insist on preconditions of victory", instead of compromising and negotiating an end to the civil war. Carter and Pastor are also absolutely correct to notice that these preconditions "deny the Syrian people their sovereign right to choose."

However, Carter and Pastor give little attention to the flow of munitions into Syria (from Russia and Iran to the Syrian government, from Qatar to the jihadists, and from Saudi Arabia to the rebels). Carter and Pastor do say "We would need ... Iran and other regional powers to stop supporting their proxies...."

Note that the lack of munitions from Western Europe and the USA to the rebels essentially doomed the rebels, as some rebel fighters joined the better-equipped jihadists, and other rebels became disillusioned and quit fighting. This is an example of how denying military aid can doom a party to the civil war.

Assad's government, the rebels, the jihadists, and Al-Qaeda all lack respect for the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, and Brahimi, so if the United Nations imposed preconditions on the parties, then the parties would boycott the peace negotiations. As a recent example of lack of respect, Ban's call on 13 Dec for a ceasefire in Syria was totally ignored by all parties. It is possible that the foreign meddlers who provide essential support to the parties (e.g., Russia and Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, etc.) could force the parties to accept preconditions established by the United Nations.

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### More Delay

Formal invitations to Geneva2 conference were scheduled to be sent on 28 Dec. However, on 31 Dec, the invitations have not yet been sent. The Syrian government blamed the Syrian National Coalition for the delay, because the Coalition missed a 27 Dec deadline to select delegates to the conference. *Al-Bawaba* says:

The 'Geneva 2' conference is set to be held in the Swiss town of Montreux in mid-January, but doubts still remain as to whether the conference, which has already been delayed on several occasions[,] will take place at all. The Syrian Opposition National Coalition, considered one of the main opposition parties, has not yet confirmed its participation in the meeting officially, and recently issued statements that it would not attend the talks if the regime continued air raids on Aleppo that has already left 500 people dead within two weeks.

"Invitations still pending for Syria peace conference, regime blames opposition for delay," *Al-Bawaba*, 11:07 GMT, 31 Dec 2013. Original source is [Daily Star](#) in Lebanon which reprints an Agence France-Press story; [Global Post](#)(AFP), 31 Dec 2013.

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### Conclusions

1. The USA and Western Europe *should* have supported Assad in the fight against Islamic terrorists. Moreover, Assad's government is secular, with toleration for other religions, unlike the jihadists and unlike Al-Qaeda. Assad is certainly better than Al-



Qaeda. See [22 Oct](#) and [14 Dec](#) 2013.

2. The Syrian National Coalition has no credibility as a leader of a nation, because it is unable to make simple decisions (e.g., unable to decide to attend Geneva2 without preconditions). See [11 Nov](#) and [27 Nov](#) 2013.
3. The Geneva2 conference was proposed by Russia and the USA in a meeting on 7 May 2013, but is currently scheduled to begin 22 Jan 2014. The eight-month delay cost approximately 40,000 deaths in the continuing civil war, estimating at 5000 dead/month. That is a horrendously expensive delay by diplomats and the Syrian National Coalition.
4. *If* Geneva2 occurs in Jan 2014, it is unlikely that the parties in Syria (i.e., Assad's government, the rebels, the jihadists, and Al-Qaeda) will accept the results of the Geneva2 agreement. The parties totally ignored the call for a ceasefire, proposed by the Secretary General of the United Nations on 13 and 16 Dec 2013.
5. As pointed out above (e.g., [22 Oct](#), [5 Nov](#), [25 Nov](#)) and by [Carter & Pastor](#), the Geneva2 process is seriously flawed in that it seeks to impose a transitional government on Syria, instead of allowing the people of Syria to vote for a leader in free elections.

For the above reasons, I believe the USA and Western Europe have been following a flawed foreign policy in Syria. However, even if we were to support Assad, it will be a tough job to defeat the jihadists and Al-Qaeda in Syria. As of 31 Dec 2013, the possibility of peace in Syria looks grim for the foreseeable future.

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