

Geneva2 & Syria: January 2014

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Foreword

My [first](#) essay on Syria covered dates from 8 Sep 2013 to 5 Oct 2013, and chronicled the history of:

- the threat of U.S. military strikes on Syria,
- 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,
- the 16 Sep Report of United Nations Inspectors that concludes chemical weapons were used in Syria on 21 Aug,
- the Russian concern with the export of experienced terrorists from Syria (20 Sep) and tersely — and incompletely — discusses the scourge of Islamic terrorism,
- the evolution of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118 on the removal of chemical weapons from Syria,
- and why I believe peace negotiations are futile with the current conditions in Syria.

My [second](#) essay on Syria covered dates from from 6 Oct 2013 through 31 Dec 2013, and chronicled the history of:

- destroying chemical weapons in Syria,
- the 12 Dec Report of United Nations Inspectors about alleged use of chemical weapons at six sites in Syria,

- occasional mentions of atrocities by jihadists and Al-Qaeda in Syria,
- 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.

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) *Al-Arabiya*. If they had a news story about Syria, then I followed their citations to either Reuters in England or the Associated Press, to get the original story.

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. So, 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. In science and engineering, we keep our opinions separate from facts, and in that spirit I label most of my opinions and my comments.

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.

During the writing of this essay, I decided to use Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) for events in Europe and Syria. Eastern Standard Time in Boston is -5 hours from GMT, Geneva is +1 hour from GMT, and *Al-Jazeera* in Qatar is +3 hours from GMT.

Terse Summary of Syria Fighters

It is helpful to understanding the Syrian civil war to divide the opposition fighters into three groups of people:

1. The so-called "rebels" are moderates, many of whom are part of the Free Syrian Army.
2. The "jihadists" want to impose an Islamic government on Syria.
3. And at least two Al-Qaeda affiliated groups fighting in Syria: (a) the Nusra Front and (b) the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) — also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

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 or jihadist groups operating in Syria, and the Coalition represents only some of the rebel groups and none of the jihadists. As explained in detail in my [second](#) essay on Syria and continued [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. Since October 2013, several commentators have noted that Assad is preferable to having Al-Qaeda control Syria.

History During Jan 2014: Destruction of Chemical Weapons And Some Atrocities in Syria

2 Jan 2014

U.S. ship being prepared

The Associated Press reported on the U.S. ship that will destroy Syrian chemical weapons at sea:

A 648-foot government cargo ship with a labyrinth of tubes and valves in its hold should sail within two weeks to destroy some of Syria's chemical weapons, officials said Thursday [2 Jan].

The cavernous cargo hold of the MV Cape Ray was opened for media tours by the Defense Department to display the two massive treatment units that will neutralize 700 tons of chemical weapons, including mustard gas and a form of sarin nerve gas. Called field deployable hydrolysis systems, the technology has never been tested under conditions at sea.

"This is essentially the same chemical process we have used to destroy our own materials," said Frank Kendall, an undersecretary of defense. "There's no mystery about the process."

....

Two chemical engineers who have worked on the sea-bound systems said they have added backup systems and redundancies to ensure the systems work in their new environment.

Capt. Rick Jordan, a 40-year veteran of the seas, said he has hand-picked the best crew of 35 he could find for the mission, which is expected to take three months. He said he has not been told his ultimate port, but the voyage should take about 10 days.

.....

Perhaps the most dangerous part of the disposal mission will be the transportation of the chemicals from 12 storage sites in Syria to the port of Latakia. Officials Thursday [2 Jan] declined to discuss those land operations, deferring to Syrian officials. Steve Szkotak, "Va. Ship Being Readied For Syria Weapons Disposal," [Associated Press](#), 16:46 EST, 2 Jan 2014. Reprinted at: [Washington Post](#).

Reuters reported:

Rick Jordan, the Cape Ray's civilian captain, said the ship had undergone sea trials last week to prove it was ready for the voyage after a period of inactivity. Additional sea trials are planned for next week to test the hydrolysis system while under way and to train the crew for possible emergencies.

"We have not tested this on board yet," he said, motioning to arched tents on the Cape Ray's lower deck where two Defense Department Field Deployable Hydrolysis Systems have been installed.

The ship is expecting to destroy about 700 tons of chemical weapons precursor agents, Kendall said. The actual work could probably be done in 45 days under ideal conditions, but the mission is expected to last about 90 days because work will be suspended in bad weather, he said.

The hydrolysis process uses water and other reagents like sodium hydroxide and sodium hypochlorite to neutralize bulk amounts of chemical warfare agents, according to the Defense Department's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center.

The chemically altered agents can then be processed by commercial firms that deal with hazardous waste. Officials said the 700 tons of chemicals, when run through the hydrolysis system, would produce 1.5 million gallons of effluents to be processed by hazardous waste firms.

David Alexander, "U.S. ship to depart soon on chemical weapons mission to Mediterranean," [Reuters](#), 18:11 EST, 2 Jan 2014.

3 Jan 2014

Danish and Norwegian cargo ships departed from Cyprus on the morning of Friday, 3 Jan. These cargo ships will anchor in international waters near the port of Latakia, Syria. The Syrian government will transport dangerous chemical weapons by land to Latakia, where they will be loaded onto the cargo ships. [Al-Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#), both on 3 Jan 2014.

1-3 Jan 2014 Islamic Hospitality by ISIL

Dr. Hussein al-Suleiman was a physician who was a commander in the Ahrar al-Sham militia, which is now part of the Islamic Front coalition of jihadists. There was some dispute between these jihadists and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) — also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIL is an Al-Qaeda group. When Suleiman went to meet with ISIL to settle the dispute, ISIL kidnapped Suleiman, tortured him for 20 days, executed him, and then mutilated his body. This happened in December 2013, and Suleiman's mutilated body was returned on 31 Dec in a prisoner exchange.

The *Daily Star* in Lebanon reported: "According to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, one of Suleiman's ears was cut off before he was killed."

On 1 Jan 2014, the Islamic Front issued a statement accusing ISIL: "They kidnapped him and tortured him, and then killed him and disfigured his corpse, in a way unknown to the Syrian people prior to the revolution, even when it came to the branches of the criminal Assad regime's security bodies."

- "Syrian Coalition Condemns Killing of Dr. Hussein al-Suleiman by ISIS," [Syrian National Coalition](#), 1 Jan;
- "Syria opposition says jihadists 'serve regime interests'," [AFP](#), 1 Jan;
- "Syria: Western-backed Coalition accuse ISIS of serving Assad's interests," [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), 2 Jan;
- "ISIS condemned for brutal murder of fellow jihadist," [Daily Star](#) in Lebanon, 3 Jan; reprint of *Daily Star* article, [Al-Bawaba](#), 3 Jan;
- "ISIL Terrorists 'Torture, Kill, Disfigure' Ahrar Al-Sham Commander," [FARS](#) in Iran, 3 Jan;
- "Syria opposition clash with al-Qaeda group," [Al-Jazeera](#), 3 Jan;

The execution of Dr. Suleiman was the straw that broke the camel's back, and caused rebels and jihadists to unite in a fight to push ISIL out of Syria, as described [below](#).

On 19 Dec 2013, [Amnesty International](#) reported that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was operating secret prisons in Syria where people were tortured and killed. [Al-Jazeera](#), 4 Jan 2014.

On 2 Jan 2014, a car bomb exploded in a Shiite area of Beirut Lebanon and killed 4 or 5 people (not including the suicide bomber) and wounded 77 people. On 4 Jan, ISIL claimed responsibility for that car bomb, as ISIL opposes Hezbollah support for Assad's government. [Daily Star](#). Separately, ISIL took control of Fallujah, Iraq on 4 Jan. [Al-Jazeera](#). These events show how the civil war in Syria is spilling into neighboring nations of Lebanon and Iraq. ISIL is actually an Iraqi terrorist group, which entered Syria sometime around April 2013, bringing many foreign fighters into Syria.

What is Islamic hospitality like? Read the story "Former ISIS captives in Aleppo share horror stories of their captivity," [Al-Bawaba](#), 9 Jan 2014.

7 Jan 2014

First Shipment of Chemicals Out of Syria

A first shipment of chemicals was transferred from two Syrian military sites to a Danish cargo ship in the port of Latakia, Syria on 7 Jan 2014. The Danish ship then traveled to international waters off the coast of Syria, to await a second delivery of chemicals. [Statement](#) by Ms. Kaag; [Associated Press](#), 10:45 EST; [Reuters](#), 12:34 EST; [NY Times](#); [Al-Jazeera](#); all on 7 Jan 2014.

The OPCW posted a news release at its website:

The removal of the first consignment of priority chemicals from the Syrian Arab Republic took place today. The chemicals were transported from two sites and loaded onto a Danish vessel which left the port of Latakia. The operation was assisted and verified by the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria.

"This is an important step commencing the transportation of these materials as part of the plan to complete their disposal outside the territory of Syria" the Director-General said. "I encourage the Syrian government to maintain the momentum to remove the remaining priority chemicals, in a safe and timely manner, so that they can be destroyed outside of Syria as quickly as possible."

Under Security Council resolution 2118 (2013) and decisions of the OPCW Executive Council, Syria's entire chemical weapons programme is to be destroyed by 30 June 2014.

[OPCW](#), 7 Jan 2014. Also posted at [OPCW/UN](#).

8 Jan 2014 OPCW tells Syria to hurry

On 8 Jan, OPCW announced:

The Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü informed the OPCW Executive Council today [8 Jan] about the commencement of the removal of priority chemicals from Syria for destruction outside the country and described it as "an important new phase" in the work of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission.

The Director-General noted that this movement has occurred after some delays in December caused by security concerns, the procurement and delivery of large quantities of packaging and transportation materials and equipment, and adverse weather conditions. He stated that despite these challenging circumstances, Syria has now received "virtually all of the necessary logistical resources for the ground transportation" of priority chemicals to the port of Latakia for removal from Syria by maritime vessels and underlined the importance of maintaining progress.

The Executive Council in its report has noted "that, notwithstanding the technical difficulties resulting in delays, the transportation of priority chemicals began on 7 January 2014, and encouraged all States Parties in a position to do so to maintain the momentum."

"Director-General: Removal of Priority Chemicals in Syria Marks 'Important New Phase' in Work of Joint Mission," [OPCW](#), 8 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reported:

The global chemical weapons watchdog on Wednesday urged Syria to intensify efforts to get its stockpile of raw materials for poison gas and nerve agents to a port, so it can be shipped out of the country and destroyed.

....

Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons spokesman Michael Luhan said the Nobel Peace Prize-winning watchdog is "exhorting the Syrian government to intensify its efforts so we can conclude this critical part of this mission absolutely as fast as conditions allow."

"Watchdog Wants To Speed Up Syrian Disarmament," [Associated Press](#), 10:35 EST, 8 Jan 2014.

See also: "Watchdog body urges Syria to speed up chemical handover," [Reuters](#), 12:32 GMT, 8 Jan 2014.

Opposition wants chemical weapons

The New York Times reports:

Syria's government said Wednesday [8 Jan] that insurgents had assaulted two storage sites for some of the deadly chemical weapons components it has pledged to eliminate. It was the first time the Syrian authorities had reported such attacks in the three months since an international effort began to sequester and purge the country of the banned munitions.

Bassam Sabbagh, the Syrian representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the Hague-based group that is helping oversee the destruction of the Syrian arsenal, reported the attacks at the group's executive council meeting, according to a European diplomat who was present. The diplomat spoke on the condition of anonymity because the meeting's deliberations were private and the Syrian's account was not publicly disclosed.

The attacks, if confirmed, underscore the difficulties in securing and destroying the chemical weapons in the midst of a civil war, a point that the organization's officials have repeatedly made since an ambitious joint mission with the United Nations to eliminate them began in early October with the Syrian government's consent.

....

Officials declined to comment on the account by Mr. Sabbagh, who told the executive council that insurgents had assaulted a storage site near the city of Homs and a second site outside Damascus, according to the European diplomat. Mr. Sabbagh did not specify when the attacks took place, the identities of the attackers or what damage, if

any, had resulted, but said that the attacks "would have been disastrous if the terrorist plans had worked," the European diplomat said.

....

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and diplomats following the proceedings in The Hague have carefully avoided accusing Mr. Assad of any backsliding, but the tone of their comments has taken on a firmer edge.

"We want to make it clear that any additional delays could really imperil the ability to meet the overall deadlines," Michael Luhan, a spokesman for the organization, said in a telephone interview. "What also needs to be made clear is that we need to see activity pick up now."

Nick Cumming-Bruce & Rick Gladstone, "Syria Reports 2 Attacks on Chemical Arms Sites," [NY Times](#), 8 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reported:

Syria's representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has claimed that insurgents twice launched unsuccessful attacks on Syrian depots where chemicals used in poison gas and nerve agents are being stored, a Western diplomat said Thursday.

The diplomat said Syria's ambassador to the OPCW, Bassam Sabbagh, reported the alleged attempted attacks Wednesday at a closed meeting of the group's executive council. The diplomat, who was at the meeting, spoke on condition of anonymity because it was closed to the media.

Sabbagh was not immediately available to comment, and the OPCW declined to comment because the remarks were made at a private meeting. The New York Times first reported the Syrian's comments.

According to the diplomat who spoke to The Associated Press, Syria claims that the insurgent attacks on storage sites near the city of Homs and in a Damascus suburb were repelled. It was not clear when the alleged attacks happened and the report could not be independently verified.

Mike Corder, "Diplomat: Syria Says Rebels Target Chemical Depots," [Associated Press](#), 12:34 EST, 9 Jan 2014.

more on 21 Aug 2013 chemical weapons use

Richard Lloyd, a former UN weapons inspector, and Theodore Postol, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), examined possible trajectories of the rocket that delivered the Sarin gas in East Ghouta on 21 Aug 2013. They found that the range of the rockets was too short for the rocket to have been launched from land controlled by the Syrian government. Their work contradicts conclusions released by the White House on 30 Aug

2013. While the White House believes Assad is responsible for the launching of Sarin gas, Lloyd and Postol show the rocket was launched from land controlled by rebels. Matthew Schofield, McClatchy Foreign Staff, "New analysis of rocket used in Syria chemical attack undercuts U.S. claims," [Ft. Worth Star-Telegram](#), and [Miami Herald](#), 15 Jan 2014; "New Study Refines View of Sarin Attack in Syria," [NY Times](#), 28 Dec 2013.

The Russians were really gleeful at the results of this new study, because it supports the Russian position that the rebels were responsible for the chemical weapons attack. [rt.com](#), 16 Jan 2014; [Voice of Russia](#), 17 Jan 2014.

United Nations accuses ISIL of war crimes

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has been on a crusade to indict Assad for war crimes. But on 16 Jan 2014 she began a more evenhanded approach, and accused ISIL of war crimes. Agence France-Presse reported:

Recent reported mass executions by Syrian rebel groups, especially by an Al-Qaeda-linked faction, "may amount to war crimes," U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said Thursday [16 Jan].

"While exact numbers are difficult to verify, reliable eyewitness testimony that we have gathered suggests that many civilians and fighters in the custody of extremist armed opposition groups have been executed since the beginning of this year," she said in a statement.

"Executions and unlawful killings are in violation of international human rights and humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes," the statement said.

Syria today is a battleground not only between the army loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and rebels seeking his ouster, but also between more moderate rebel groups under the Free Syria Army banner and the jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group which is connected to Al-Qaeda.

ISIL has seized control of Raqa, a city in Syria's north, according to a British-based monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said reports in the past two weeks have highlighted mass executions of civilians and fighters in Raqa, Aleppo and Idlib by hardline guerrillas, in particular by ISIL.

"Deeply disturbing reports" from Raqa suggested "mass executions" by ISIL, Pillay said.

Some of the killings in Syria appeared to have been carried out when rebel fighters abandoning bases slaughtered people in their custody, in violation of the Geneva Conventions, she said.

"These reports are particularly alarming, given the large numbers of people, including

civilians, that armed opposition groups in Syria are believed to be holding in custody. The taking of hostages is prohibited under international humanitarian law and may also constitute a war crime," she said.

"Everyone involved in serious crimes must be held accountable," Pillay said. "U.N. says executions by Syrian rebels 'may amount to war crimes'," [Al-Arabiya](#), 12:08 GMT, 16 Jan 2014.

See also [Associated Press](#), 16 Jan 2014.

chemical weapons removal

During 8-15 Jan 2014, there was no news about the removal of chemical weapons from Syria. Presumably, chemical weapons are being removed on randomly chosen days, to frustrate attempts by jihadists and Al-Qaeda to hijack the weapons.

On 16 Jan, OPCW announced that security concerns and logistics — plus earlier bad weather and bureaucracy — had slowed the rate of shipment of chemical weapons out of Syria. The deadline for final destruction of all of the most dangerous chemical weapons has now slipped to 30 June 2014, from the original deadline of 31 March 2014. To date, only 16 tons of 560 tons of dangerous chemicals (about 3% of the total) have been loaded on a cargo ship at Latakia, Syria. [BBC](#), [Reuters](#), [Al-Arabiya](#), all on 16 Jan 2014. [Reuters](#), 17 Jan 2014. Despite the importance of this announcement, there was no mention of it at the OPCW website. Because OPCW has been slow to post material at their website, I checked again on the night of 20 Jan 2014.

Also on 16 Jan, it was announced that ships would take chemical weapons from Syria to the port at Gioia Tauro, Italy, where they would be transferred to the M.V. Cape Ray and then destroyed at sea. The transfer will be from ship-to-ship, and no chemicals will touch Italian soil. The mayor of Gioia Tauro protested that he had not been consulted in making the decision and he promised to fight the decision. [OPCW](#); [UN/OPCW](#); [Associated Press](#); all on 16 Jan 2014.

One Italian newspaper reported: "The mayor [of Gioia Tauro] said that the city was devoid of a hospital that was able to handle an emergency if it arose." [Gazzetta del Sud](#), 16 Jan 2014. See also [ANSAméd](#).

On 17 Jan, mayors of Gioia Tauro and neighboring towns demanded "guarantees" of "maximum safety" in handling the chemical weapons. [Reuters](#). It is not clear how anyone can "guarantee" that some unforeseen accident will not occur. However, the mayor has a good point that local hospitals are not prepared to treat chemical weapon exposures. One could stock antidotes at local hospitals, to prepare for accidental exposure.

20 Jan 2014
Planned Destruction of Effluent

On 20 Jan, OPCW announced firms were interested in destroying effluent from the M.V. Cape Ray, plus Syrian commodity chemicals:

A total of 14 private firms have submitted tenders to destroy 500 metric tonnes of Syria's commodity chemicals, as well as effluent from the neutralisation of its Priority chemicals, at commercial facilities outside of the Syrian Arab Republic.

The tenders were opened in a public event at the Organisation's Headquarters in The Hague today, which was attended by representatives of private firms that submitted tenders and by interested OPCW delegations. They were received in response to a "Call for Proposals for Transport, Treatment and Disposal of Hazardous and Non-Hazardous Organic and Inorganic Chemicals, Effluents and Related Materials", as advertised on the OPCW Internet website. The deadline for submitting tenders was Sunday 19 January 2014.

The list of bidding firms and their countries of origin can be [viewed here](#) [PDF - 7.3 KB]. The OPCW will now conduct technical and commercial evaluation of the bids and announce the winner(s) in early February.

"OPCW Receives Tenders from 14 Private Firms to Destroy Syrian Commodity Chemicals and Effluents," [OPCW](#), 20 Jan 2014.

21 Jan 2014 Terrorism by Nusra Front

On 21 Jan, to retaliate for strikes by Hezbollah in Syria, the Nusra Front detonated a suicide car bomb in a Shiite residential neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon. Four people were killed and a library was burned. [Al-Jazeera](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); [Reuters](#); [Daily Star](#).

24 Jan 2014 No Delivery of Syrian Chemicals

While most news coverage about Syria during 22-24 Jan concentrated on the conference in Montreux and the negotiations in Geneva, Reuters reported on something really important:

Western governments are growing impatient with Syria's failure to follow up promptly on a first small shipment of chemical weapons and fear Damascus will miss a deadline to hand over all toxins by mid-2014.

Sources at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is jointly overseeing the destruction process with the United Nations, said the concerns have been raised during internal discussions, but have not yet been reported to the U.N. Security Council.

Syria agreed to dismantle its entire chemical weapons program by June 30, under a deal proposed by Russia and agreed with the United States. It has until March 31 to relinquish around 500 tonnes of the worst substances, including more than 20 tonnes of mustard gas stored in liquid form.

That deadline had already been expected to slip, but the concern now is that the entire destruction program will be pushed back. Syria says the program faces security concerns.

....

It has been more than two weeks since the first shipment of chemicals reached the northern port of Latakia on January 7 and was transferred onto a Danish vessel.

But the first batch of 16 metric tonnes (17.63 tons) was only just over one percent of the 1,300 tonnes of chemical weapons declared by Syria to the OPCW and was possibly already in or near the port and did not have to be transported far.

Several foreign governments funding and assisting the process had expected more shipments would have already been made, the sources said, and frustration is growing.

"It's starting to become a problem and they are at risk of being reported (to the United Nations) for non-compliance," one source involved in the discussions told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

While there is widespread frustration at the slow pace of the chemical weapons handover, "no one is seriously considering reporting this to the Security Council," another high-level source involved in the discussions said.

"There is frustration. There is no doubt about that," the source said. "But the issue of non-compliance will occur when people believe they are being misguided and that there is a scheme to stall. We're not there yet."

....

"We had been giving them the benefit of the doubt because cooperation began smoothly, but now it looks like they are making excuses," another source who attended discussions said.

"We need to see some more shipments, and not of the same size as this first small one," the source said.

The high-level OPCW source said Syria does not plan to ship more chemicals until transport containers have been fitted with armor and other security equipment, such as radio scramblers.

"The Syrians don't feel comfortable shipping the containers unless all the security equipment is in place," the source said.

Western government have said they will not provide equipment which could be used to support Assad's forces and it is unclear what Russia, Syria's main international backer,

will do.

Anthony Deutsch, "Exclusive: Patience runs thin as Syrian chemical handover stalls,"

[Reuters](#), 18:55 GMT, 24 Jan 2014.

Copy at [Al-Arabiya](#), 25 Jan 2014.

27 Jan 2014

On Monday, 27 Jan, the Associated Press reported:

A U.S. cargo ship loaded with sophisticated equipment is setting sail Monday [27 Jan] for the Mediterranean Sea where it will be used to destroy dozens of containers of deadly chemical weapons being removed from Syria.

The MV Cape Ray was slated to leave in the afternoon for what is expected to be a roughly two-week trip to the Italian port of Gioia Tauro, where chemicals will be transferred to the ship.

The chemicals include raw materials for making sarin and mustard gas and they will be destroyed on board the Cape Ray at sea.

On Monday, a second shipment of chemical weapons was loaded onto Danish and Norwegian ships at the port of Latakia in Syria, according to a statement from the U.N. and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The ships are expected to stay in international waters off Syria waiting for additional loads.

Lolita C. Baldor, "US Ship Heads On Syrian Chemical Weapons Mission," [Associated Press](#), 13:12 EST, 27 Jan 2014.

[Reuters](#) reported that the Syrians had delivered a second shipment of chemical weapons to a Danish ship at the port of Latakia.

The United Nations press release says:

Today [27 Jan], a further shipment of chemical weapons materials took place from the Syrian Arab Republic. The chemical materials were verified by Joint Mission personnel before being loaded in Lattakia port onto Danish and Norwegian cargo vessels for onward transportation.

The vessels were accompanied by a naval escort provided by the People's Republic of China, Denmark, Norway and the Russian Federation.

The Joint Mission looks forward to the Syrian Arab Republic continuing its efforts to complete the removal of its chemical weapons materials in a safe, secure and timely manner, in line with OPCW Executive Council decisions and UN Security Council Resolution.

[UN/OPCW](#), 27 Jan 2014.

28 Jan 2014

On 28 Jan, Reuters reported:

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon suggested in a report on Tuesday [28 Jan] that an operation to remove Syria's chemical weapons had been unnecessarily delayed and urged the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to speed up the process.

....

Ban said in a report to the U.N. Security Council, dated January 27 but made publicly available on Tuesday, that a December 31 deadline for removing Syria's worst chemicals had been missed. Syria has said the operation faces security challenges.

"While remaining aware of the challenging security situation inside the Syrian Arab Republic, it is the assessment of the Joint Mission that (Syria) has sufficient material and equipment to carry out multiple ground movements to ensure the expeditious removal of chemical weapons material," Ban said.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons set the December 31 deadline for the removal from Syria of the worst chemicals, which include components for making sarin and VX nerve agent. These toxins are supposed to be destroyed offshore on a specially equipped U.S. ship by March 31.

The rest of Syria's chemical materials are due to be transferred out of the country by February 5 and destroyed by June 30. The operation is being overseen by a joint mission of the global chemical arms watchdog and the United Nations.

....

Ban's report was written before the joint mission said on Monday [27 Jan, see above] that a second shipment of chemical weapons materials had been transferred out of Syria, nearly three weeks after the first batch was removed.

Ban said in his report that the first shipment represented a "small quantity" of the worst chemicals and that the entire operation was now behind schedule.

Louis Charbonneau & Michelle Nichols, "U.N. suggests removal of Syria chemicals unnecessarily delayed," [Reuters](#), 21:37 GMT, 28 Jan 2014.

At night on 31 Jan, I could not find Ban's report at the United Nations' website.

29 Jan 2014

On 29 Jan, Reuters reports:

Syria has given up less than five percent of its chemical weapons arsenal and will miss next week's deadline to send all toxic agents abroad for destruction, sources familiar with the matter said on Wednesday [29 Jan].

The deliveries, in two shipments this month to the northern Syrian port of Latakia totalled 4.1 percent of the roughly 1,300 tonnes of toxic agents reported by Damascus to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), said the sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"It's not enough and there is no sign of more," one source briefed on the situation said. Anthony Deutsch, "Exclusive — Syria has shipped out less than 5 percent of chemical weapons," [Reuters](#), 18:52 GMT, 29 Jan 2014.

See also Agence France-Press story at [Al-Arabiya](#), 30 Jan 2014.

30 Jan 2014

On 30 Jan, Reuters reports:

The United States on Thursday [30 Jan] accused Syria of dragging its feet on giving up its chemical arms, putting at risk a deal to remove such weapons of mass destruction from the country as it splits apart in a chaotic civil war.

President Barack Obama this week [in his State of the Union speech on 28 Jan] touted the chemical weapons agreement as one of the few U.S. diplomatic achievements on Syria, but the State Department said just 4 percent of Syria's deadliest chemical agents has been shipped out of the country for destruction at sea.

The United States has few good choices to force President Bashar al-Assad to comply.

....

Assad's decision in September to give up chemical arms helped him avoid threatened U.S. air strikes in retaliation for a poison gas attack near Damascus in August [2013] that killed hundreds of people, many of them women and children.

But the international operation to dispose of Syria's chemical stockpile is now six to eight weeks behind schedule and it will miss next week's deadline for sending all toxic agents abroad for destruction, sources familiar with the matter told Reuters.

....

Underscoring the Obama's administration's anxiety, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel discussed the issue in a call on Wednesday [29 Jan] with his Russian counterpart, Defense Minister Sergei Shogun, and asked him to "do what he could to influence the Syrian government to comply."

In a rare case of diplomatic cooperation between the two countries, Moscow and Washington joined forces last year to get Assad to agree to give up his chemical weapons stockpiles.

But critics of Obama say Russia is too close to Syria — its only ally in the Middle East

— to enforce the agreement.

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, a frequent Republican critic of Obama's Syria policy, said: "Having the Russians disarm Assad is sort of like Mussolini disarming Hitler; I'm not so sure it's going to work."

Though the administration stopped short of threatening action if Syria fails to comply, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the United States had never taken the military option off the table.

....

Dennis Ross, a former Middle East adviser to Obama, said he had always assumed "the Assad regime would have to be coerced every step of the way to destroy its chemical weapons."

"The question will be whether the Russians will tolerate Assad making them look bad," Ross said, suggesting the Syrian president was stalling "to see what he can get away with."

Lesley Wroughton & Matt Spetalnick, "U.S. accuses Syria of stalling on chemical arms handover," [Reuters](#), 22:31 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

See also [Associated Press](#), [Washington Post](#), both on 30 Jan 2014.

My comment: After three years of Hillary Clinton, Obama, and John Kerry insulting and threatening Assad, the U.S. government has no influence with Assad. And Assad surely realizes that after he gives up his chemical weapons, Western governments will have no need for cooperation from Assad.

31 Jan 2014

On 31 Jan, OPCW issued the following statement:

In a meeting of the OPCW Executive Council yesterday, Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü briefed the Council on efforts underway to expedite the process of removing Syrian chemicals that have been identified for destruction outside Syrian territory.

"While the two shipments (of chemicals) this month represent a start, the need for the process to pick up pace is obvious," the Director-General told the Council. "Ways and means must be found to establish continuity and predictability of shipments to assure States Parties that the programme, while delayed, is not deferred."

The Director-General briefed the Council about his exchanges with senior Syrian officials in which he has underlined the need for a timeframe to be provided by the Syrian Government for the removal of chemicals. The Syrian government, while expressing concerns about the current security situation, has reiterated its commitment to completing the programme and assured that it is working on a schedule for the transport and removal of the chemicals. The Director-General and the United Nations

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke recently and agreed that the removal process must be accelerated.

Since the commencement of the mission in Syria, the Council has met regularly to oversee the implementation of its decisions pertaining to the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons programme. Yesterday's meeting took stock of the work of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission and the latest developments as reported by the Director-General in his recent monthly report and oral update. There was a shared sentiment in favour of more rapid progress given that the multinational effort in support of the removal and destruction programme has committed significant resources. The Council decided to reconvene on 21 February to continue its deliberations.

"Director-General: Need to 'Pick Up Pace' In Removing Chemicals from Syria," [OPCW](#), 31 Jan 2014.

2 Feb 2014 Death Toll for January

On 1 Feb 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) announced that at least 136,227 people had died in the civil war in Syria since 18 March 2011, up to 31 Jan 2014. [SOHR](#), 2 Feb 2014.

A total of 5794 people died in Syria during January 2014, which made January one of the deadliest months in the civil war. [Al-Jazeera](#), 21:01 GMT; [AFP](#), 22:31 GMT; both on 1 Feb. [Al-Bawaba](#), 07:12 GMT, 2 Feb 2014. Neither the Associated Press nor Reuters reported this story on 1-2 Feb 2014.

Rebels & Jihadists Fight Against ISIL

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an Al-Qaeda group, entered Syria sometime around April 2013, bringing many foreign fighters into Syria, and hijacking the revolution against Assad in Syria. ISIL had perpetrated many atrocities against rebels, jihadists, and the people of Syria. These atrocities included kidnappings, torture, executions, terrorist bombings, The execution of [Dr. Suleiman](#) was the straw that broke the camel's back. On 3 Jan 2014, both rebels and jihadists in Syria united in a battle to push ISIL out of Syria.

On 3 Jan 2014, a new alliance of eight brigades of rebels declared:

We, the Army of the Mujahideen, pledge to defend ourselves and our honor, wealth and lands, and to fight ISIL, which has violated the rule of God, until it announces its dissolution.

The new alliance accused ISIL of "wrongly accusing [rebels] of heresy", theft and looting, of "kidnapping, killing and torturing [rebel] commanders and activists", amongst other misconduct.

"New Syria rebel alliance declares war on Al-Qaeda," [Arab News](#), 4 Jan 2014.

Separately, the Islamic Front also fought against ISIL on 3 Jan.

The BBC reports:

The fight against ISIS [also known as ISIL] appears to be the priority for all groups fighting the Syrian government, with one exception — the Nusra Front, our correspondent says.

"Al-Qaeda-linked Isis under attack in northern Syria," [BBC](#), 4 Jan 2014.

Also see: [Al-Bawaba](#); [france24.com](#); [AFP](#); [NY Times](#); [Reuters](#); [Los Angeles Times](#); [Al-Jazeera](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); all on 4 Jan 2014.

On 5 Jan, the battle against ISIL continued for a third consecutive day. [Al-Jazeera](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); [Reuters](#), 12:42 GMT; [Associated Press](#); all on 5 Jan 2014. On 5 Jan ISIL withdrew from two towns in northern Syria — al-Dana in Idlib province, and Atma. [Reuters](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); both on 5 Jan 2014.

On 6 Jan, rebels and jihadists freed at least fifty people from prisons operated by ISIL in Raqa, Syria. [Associated Press](#), 09:18 EST, 6 Jan 2014; [Al-Jazeera Blog](#); [Al-Jazeera](#); all on 6 Jan 2014.

On the morning of 7 Jan, journalists seemed to forget about the fighting against ISIL. One exception was *Al-Jazeera*, who reported that ISIL had shot dead approximately fifty "media activists, relief workers and other civilians" who were in an ISIL prison in Aleppo. [Al-Jazeera](#), 7 Jan 2014.

Also on 7 Jan, the leader of the Nusra Front (an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria) called for a ceasefire between ISIL and the rebels/jihadists, and also proposed the creation of an Islamic court to resolve disputes. [Associated Press](#); [Reuters](#); [NY Times](#); [BBC](#), all on 7 Jan 2014. [Al-Jazeera](#), 8 Jan 2014.

On the morning of 8 Jan, rebels/jihadists seized control of the former children's hospital in Aleppo that was recently used as an ISIL base. [Associated Press](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); [Al-Jazeera](#); all on 8 Jan 2014. By night on 8 Jan, there were "hardly any" ISIL terrorists remaining in Aleppo. [Al-Bawaba](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); both on 8 Jan 2014.

On the morning of 9 Jan, rebels and jihadists attacked ISIL in al-Dana and several other towns. [Al-Jazeera](#), 9 Jan 2014.

On the morning of 10 Jan, the Associated Press reported that "nearly 500 people" had died in fighting between ISIL and the rebels/jihadists, beginning 3 Jan:

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Friday that at least 482 people have been killed in the fighting. It said 240 of the dead were rebel fighters, while another 157 were from the "Islamic State." The remaining 85 were civilians, the Observatory said.

"Activists: Nearly 500 Dead In Syria Rebel Clashes," [Associated Press](#), 07:32 EST, 10 Jan 2014.

On 10 Jan, ISIL was winning in al-Raqqa, but ISIL had lost in Aleppo and Idlib provinces. [Al-Jazeera](#), 10 Jan 2014.

On 11 Jan, most journalists (e.g., Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Arab News, Associated Press) did *not* report the ninth day of fighting against ISIL. [Al-Bawaba](#) reprinted a story from [PressTV](#) in Iran about ISIL putting a bomb "under a vehicle used by militants from Ahrar al-Sham brigade that has led the battle against ISIL militants in the area." The bomb killed five people.

On 11 Jan 2014, Reuters summarized the recent news:

An al Qaeda affiliate in Syria [ISIL] battled rival rebels across the country's north on Saturday and dozens of bodies piled up in a hospital in an insurgent-held city, a monitoring group [the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights] said.

A week of infighting between the al Qaeda-linked group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and other groups including another al Qaeda-affiliated faction has killed hundreds of fighters opposed to President Bashar al-Assad.

....

In an indication of how heavy the fighting had been in Raqqa in recent days with rival Islamist rebels including some loyal to another al Qaeda affiliate, the Nusra Front, the Observatory quoted medical sources as saying there were dozens of bodies of Islamic State fighters in a hospital.

The ISIL fighters had also dumped the corpses of dozens of their foes in the nearby village of Jazra, to the west of Raqqa, the Observatory said.

The monitoring group said on Friday [10 Jan] 500 people had been killed in the rebel fighting which erupted eight days ago.
"Rebels clash in north Syria, bodies pile up in hospital: monitors," [Reuters](#), 17:12 GMT, 11 Jan 2014.

On 12 Jan, the Associated Press reported:

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights activist group said Sunday [12 Jan] that at least 697 people have been killed since the clashes began Jan. 3. The toll includes 351 fighters from the Islamist and mainstream opposition brigades, 246 from the "Islamic State," and 100 civilians.

The [al-Qaida-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] group has alienated other rebel factions and civilians in the territory under its control by using brutal tactics to implement its strict interpretation of Islamic law. It has also kidnapped and killed its opponents.

Ryan Lucas, "Activists: Nearly 700 Dead In Syrian Rebel Clashes," [Associated Press](#), 17:10 GMT, 12 Jan 2014.

On 12 Jan, the tenth day of the fight against ISIL, Reuters reported that ISIL regained some land:

A group linked to al Qaeda recaptured much of its stronghold in the northeast Syrian city of Raqqa on Sunday [12 Jan], activists said, dealing a blow to rival rebel groups backed by Gulf Arab and Western states.

Fighting between the al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and rival Islamists and more moderate rebels have killed hundreds of people over the last 10 days and shaken the hardline militant group led by foreign jihadists.

But with the latest counter-offensive, ISIL has regained much of the territory it lost, activists said.

In Raqqa, the only provincial capital under rebel control, activists said ISIL fighters battled remnants of rival Islamist units including the Nusra Front, another al Qaeda affiliate, in several neighbourhoods.

To the north, ISIL recaptured the town of Tel Abyad on the border with Turkey over the weekend [11-12 Jan], they said.

Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Group linked to al Qaeda regains ground in northeast Syria," [Reuters](#), 19:24 GMT, 12 Jan 2014.

On 13 Jan, Reuters published an unconfirmed report that ISIL had recently executed "dozens", "about 70", or "up to 100" captured jihadist fighters. [Reuters](#). Journalists covering Syria spent most of their attention on diplomats in Paris on 13 Jan, and ignored fighting in Syria.

On 13 Jan 2014, polio immunization was halted in Raqqa, Syria, owing to the fighting by rebels and jihadists against ISIL. This means that innocent children did *not* receive a required second dose of oral polio vaccine. [WHO](#), [Reuters](#), [Gulf News](#).

On the morning of 14 Jan, there was again little mention by journalists of the continuing fight against ISIL. *Al-Bawaba* reported that an Islamic car bomb detonated by ISIL killed eight rebels/jihadists at a checkpoint in Idlib, Syria, on the night of 13 Jan. [Al-Bawaba](#).

At night on 14 Jan, Reuters reported Assad's military "has retaken territory around the northern city of Aleppo ... after two weeks of rebel infighting that has weakened the insurgency against President Bashar al-Assad." Meanwhile, ISIL regrouped and recovered much of the territory that it had recently lost to rebels/jihadists:

Fighting between the al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and rival Islamists and more moderate rebels have killed hundreds of people over two weeks and shaken ISIL, a militant faction led by foreign jihadists.

But ISIL regrouped and retook much of its stronghold in the eastern city of Raqqa on Sunday from remnants of the Nusra Front, another al Qaeda affiliate although much more Syrian in makeup, and Islamist units called the Islamic Front.

ISIL took control of the town of al-Bab, east of Aleppo, from other rebels on Monday, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring

group.

The Observatory, which tracks Syria's war using sources from both sides, said eight fighters from Ahrar al-Sham, a unit within the Islamic Front, were killed by an ISIL car bomb in the western province of Idlib just before midnight on Monday [13 Jan].

Oliver Holmes, "Syrian government forces advance as rebel infighting rages," [Reuters](#), 20:38 GMT, 14 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera and the Associated Press both reported that ISIL was in "full control" of the city of Raqqa. [Al-Jazeera](#) and [Associated Press](#), both on 14 Jan 2014.

On 15 Jan 2014, there was no news about the battle against ISIL.

On 16 Jan 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights announced that 1,069 people had been killed in fighting between ISIL and rebels/jihadists. This total includes 608 rebels/jihadists, 312 ISIL personnel, 130 civilians (21 of whom were executed by ISIL at the children's hospital in Aleppo), and 19 unknown.

[Reuters](#); [Associated Press](#); [Al-Jazeera](#), all on 16 Jan 2014.

On 17 Jan, the Syrian government offered to join with rebels and jihadists in fighting against Islamic terrorists (i.e., ISIL). [RIA-Novosti](#). My comment is that — while this proposal is logical (i.e., the enemy of my enemy is my friend) — it is very unlikely that the rebels would cooperate with Assad's military, 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 rebels insist that Assad must be replaced.

On 18 Jan 2014, there was no news about the battle against ISIL. Instead, journalists were concerned with the vote by the Syrian National Coalition to attend Geneva2. On 19 Jan 2014, the Coalition was trying to select delegates to Geneva2.

On 20 Jan 2014, Reuters reported:

A group linked to al Qaeda, emboldened by its recent victory over rival rebels in Syria, has imposed sweeping restrictions on personal freedoms in the northern province of Raqqa as it seeks to consolidate control over the region.

Reuters obtained copies of four statements issued on Sunday [19 Jan] by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) prohibiting music from being played in public and photographs of people being posted in shop windows.

The sale of cigarettes and shisha water pipes are banned, women must wear the niqab, or full face veil, in public and men are obliged to attend Friday prayers at a mosque.

The directives, which cite Koranic verses and Islamic teaching, are the latest evidence of ISIL's ambition to establish a Syrian state founded on radical Islamist principles.

....

The first and only city to have fallen completely under rebel control, Raqqa has been

held up by many ordinary Syrians as an example of what Syria might look like in a post-Assad era.

....

The group's statements — its most extensive yet — were unlikely to face opposition given last week's expulsion of Ahrar, Nusra and other rebel factions.

ISIL had pulled out of Raqqa and other towns in northern Syria earlier this month after an Islamist rebel alliance attacked its strongholds, taking advantage of popular resentment of the group's foreign commanders, its killing of other rebels and the drive to impose a strict interpretation of Islamic law.

But ISIL regrouped, using snipers, truck-mounted commando units and suicide bombers to retake much of the lost territory.

Stephen Kalin, "Al Qaeda offshoot imposes strict Islamic rules in north Syria," [Reuters](#), 18:08 GMT, 20 Jan 2014.

Since about 17 Jan, there has been little information published about the presumed continuing battle against ISIL.

On 22 Jan, Reuters reported:

Clashes continued on Wednesday [22 Jan] on the southern outskirts of Aleppo between militants from the al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and more moderate Islamist fighters.

More than 1,000 people have been killed this month due to the infighting between rival rebel groups, which is fuelled by resentment of ISIL's kidnapping and killing of opponents and its drive to impose its own strict interpretation of Islamic law.

The fighting has depleted rebel ranks and helped government forces to retake territory around Aleppo in its wake.

Stephen Kalin, "Syria hails Aleppo airport reopening as a victory over rebels," [Reuters](#), 15:06 GMT, 22 Jan 2014.

On 23 Jan, Ayman al-Zawahri, the head of Al-Qaeda, called on rebels and jihadists to stop fighting against ISIL, and concentrate on fighting against Assad. The Associated Press also reported:

Rival rebels initially pushed the Islamic State out of several towns, but the al-Qaida linked group has slowly clawed back some of its lost ground. On Thursday [23 Jan], its fighters seized full control of the town of Manbij, some 90 kilometers (55 miles) west of Aleppo, following some 10 days of fighting, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Observatory said the death toll in 20 days of clashes has reached 1,395, most of them rebel fighters.

Bassem Mroue, "Al-Qaida Chief Urges End To Syria Rebel Infighting," [Associated Press](#),

18:54 GMT, 23 Jan 2014.

See also: [Reuters](#), 12:00 GMT; [Al-Bawaba](#); [Al-Arabiya](#) ("The Observatory said the [1395] figure included 760 moderate and Islamist rebels, 426 ISIS fighters, 190 civilians and 19 others whose identities have not been established."); [Al-Arabiya](#) (al-Zawahiri); all on 23 Jan 2014.

During 22-30 Jan, there was a dearth of news about the battle against ISIL. The peace conference in Montreux on 22 Jan, and the negotiations in Geneva that began on 24 Jan, pushed this battle out of the news.

On 30 Jan, Reuters reported that ISIL was expanding into neighboring Lebanon from Syria: In Syria, the al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) holds territory in the north and east but has been on the defensive in recent weeks after coming under attack from rival rebel groups that resent its harsh rule.

The sources say it is now seeking to expand in Lebanon, particularly the northern city of Tripoli, plagued by violence and lawlessness since the start of Syria's uprising nearly three years ago.

The accounts from the sources, including fighters who support and oppose al Qaeda in Syria, appeared to be supported at the weekend when a statement in the name of Abu Sayyaf al-Ansary — described as al Qaeda's commander in Lebanon — said the group had put down roots in Lebanon.

In an audio statement Ansary declared allegiance to the head of ISIL. Speaking, he said, from Tripoli, he announced Lebanon would be a gateway for al Qaeda to strike at Israel.

....

Mariam Karouny, "Insight — After Syria, al Qaeda expanding in Lebanon," [Reuters](#), 15:27 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

My comments: Lebanon was already beleaguered with Palestinian terrorists, the Hezbollah militia (Shiite muslims), Sunni muslims, and Christians. Lebanon does *not* need more weapons and fighters, they already have a dysfunctional government and plenty of terrorists. Now, Hillary Clinton's obsession with removing Assad, which obsession was continued by John Kerry, has allowed ISIL to expand into Lebanon and threaten Israel.

My Comments

On 4 Jan, the fight by rebels and jihadists against ISIL was hot news, reported in many newspapers. But on 7 Jan, news coverage began to wane. There is probably little interest in Western Europe and the USA concerning details about towns in Syria that are unknown in Europe and America. And covering bullets and blood gets monotonous.

During 24-31 Jan, journalists focused on the negotiations in Geneva and the lack of delivery of chemicals by Syria to cargo ships. Any fighting against ISIL was ignored.

It seems that ISIL is better equipped, more experienced, and has better leadership than the rebels/jihadists. That is probably why ISIL did not retreat from Syria in January 2014.

There is doubt whether the rebels and jihadists can afford to fight against *both* Assad's government *and* ISIL.

Why Peace Negotiations Futile: Disorganization of the Syrian National Coalition & Politics of the Peace Process

My [first](#) and [second](#) essays on Syria explain why I believe peace negotiations are futile with the current conditions in Syria. The following information continues this history of frustrated negotiations.

4 Jan 2014

Syrian National Council says NO!

On 4 Jan Agence France-Presse reported that the Syrian National Council reaffirmed its Oct 2013 decision *not* to attend Geneva2, and additionally to withdraw from the Syrian National Coalition if the Coalition attended Geneva2.

National Council member Samir Nashar told Agence France-Presse:

The whole idea of Geneva is flawed. It is based on bridging the demands of the Syrian regime and the opposition, placing them on an equal footing. We reject this. . . .

There is nothing the international community has to offer that would make us revise our earlier decision. . . . You have to look at what the revolutionaries on the ground are saying: they too reject Geneva. What this means is there will be no Geneva at all.

"Key Syrian opposition bloc rejects Geneva talks," [Al-Bawaba](#), 11:43 GMT, 4 Jan 2014.

"Key Syrian opposition bloc rejects Geneva II," [Al-Arabiya](#), 06:10 GMT, 4 Jan 2014.

Also see: "Influential Syrian opposition bloc says will shun peace talks," [Reuters](#), 17:46 GMT, 4 Jan 2014; "SNC pulls out of Geneva II talks on Syria," [Al-Jazeera](#), 4 Jan 2014.

On 20 Jan 2014, after the Coalition decided to attend Geneva2, as explained [below](#), the Council kept its promise and resigned from the Coalition. [Al-Arabiya](#), [Al-Bawaba](#), both on 21 Jan 2014.

5-8 Jan 2014

Syrian National Coalition says ??? ? !

Late Sunday night, 5 Jan, Paris time, Agence France-Presse reported that Ahmad Jarba was re-elected for another six-month term as president of the Syrian National Coalition:

His re-election comes at a sensitive time, less than three weeks away from slated peace talks in Switzerland that would bring rebels and regime representatives to the table.

The Coalition is set to discuss on Monday [6 Jan] whether to take part in the peace talks, though a key bloc — the Syrian National Council — has already announced it will boycott the so-called Geneva 2 process.

That has raised fears the Coalition may end up rejecting the talks altogether. According to council member and veteran dissident Samir Nashar, "Ahmad Jarba does not want to go to Geneva."

"Syria opposition re-elects Jarba as leader," [Al-Arabiya](#), 22:32 GMT, 5 Jan 2014.

Also: "Syria opposition re-elects Jarba as leader," [Arab News](#).

The Syrian National Coalition issued a press release, part of which mentioned the discussion about attending Geneva2:

Well informed sources within the Coalition said that the decision on going to Geneva will be voted on tomorrow [6 Jan], after the completion of the electoral process. The Coalition has been oscillating between going to Geneva II and rejecting the invitation, in light of the international silence towards the massacres committed by the Assad regime against the Syrian people. Because of the latest attack on Aleppo by the Assad regime and the International silence that have followed, Badr al-Din Jamous, SG of the Syrian Coalition, stated earlier that this "does not encourage the Syrian Coalition's members to vote on going to Geneva during the next conference of the General Assembly." Jamous also stressed that "the Syrian Coalition cannot monopolize the decision on participation in Geneva II, so we sent a delegation of the Syrian Coalition to consult with the revolutionaries to decide upon participation in the conference." Louay Mekdad, the FSA's political and media coordinator, said that Russia "seeks to achieve the greatest possible interests for the Assad regime at Geneva II through pressuring the revolutionaries to attend the conference." Mekdad stresses that sitting with the criminal regime at the negotiating table "will end its political isolation and international ostracism, which came in response to the horrific massacres committed against the Syrian people." Mekdad went on: "The international community and Russia knew well that Geneva II would not result in a fatal blow to the Assad regime. If they really had sincere intentions, then they would try to find a solution either through Geneva II, or in any other way. George Sabra, former president of the Syrian Coalition, said that "Geneva II wouldn't result in a peaceful solution without real guarantees." Sabra also states that Russia and Iran seek to "sow division among Syrian revolutionaries through sorting them into moderates and hardliners, and through insisting that the goal of Geneva II must be fighting terrorism." Furthermore, Sabra addressed those who are being rushed into going to Geneva II, saying that "the latest statements made by the Assad regime and his allies indicate that Geneva II is not meant to achieve a political solution. Rather, those statements indicate that their real goal is legalize killing of the Syrian people." Sabra went on: "Without getting real guarantees,

the outcome of Geneva II would mean nothing to the Syrian people and this is why going to the conference is met with outright rejection."

[Syrian National Coalition](#), press release, 5 Jan 2014.

In my opinion, this press release by the Coalition shows a bewildering lack of coherent thought, mixed with propaganda. Neither Assad's attack on Aleppo, nor the alleged "international silence", are good reasons for boycotting Geneva2. Peace will never come to Syria as long as rebels refuse "sitting with the criminal regime" (i.e., Assad's government). Sabra whines about the lack of "real guarantees" — there are *never* guarantees about results of negotiations between adversaries. Sabra whines about being "rushed into going to Geneva II", but the Truth is that the planning for Geneva2 began on 7 May 2013 — there is *no* rush.

Journalists ignored this important news story on 6-7 Jan, but then at 16:06 EST on 7 Jan the Associated Press announced that the Syrian National Coalition — after *two days* of discussions — was again unable to reach a decision. On 7 Jan, it was reported that a vote might occur perhaps as early as 15 Jan, just one week before Geneva2 begins.

[Associated Press](#); [Washington Post](#); both on 7 Jan 2014.

[Al-Arabiya](#), 8 Jan 2014.

On 8 Jan, a vote was reported to be scheduled for 17 Jan, only five days before Geneva2 begins. [Daily Star](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); [RIA-Novosti](#); all on 8 Jan 2014.

So what does the Syrian National Coalition have to say about their refusal to decide? On the morning of 8 Jan 2014, the following long paragraph was posted at their website:

Haitham al-Maleh, legal committee head, stresses that the Assad regime "is against going to Geneva II, as that means the handover of power and the formation of the transitional ruling body. However, Assad has been trying to reverse this fact through his attempts, alongside Russia and Iran, to divert the main focus of Geneva II, which is the formation of a transitional governing body without any role for Assad to play."

Maleh also points out that "we support a political solution, wherever it was, but it must be based on the terms spelled out in Geneva I. We also don't reject the participation of Iran provided that it recognizes the Geneva I Communique as a basis for negotiations, as well as after the Iranians pull back all their troops who are fighting with more than 25 factions inside Syria." Furthermore, Maleh stresses that "we simply will not go to Geneva II to negotiate with someone who is occupying our country." Maleh said earlier that "Russia is fully aware that Assad cannot play any role in the transitional phase, the Russians are absolutely certain of Assad's downfall. However, they need real guarantees to ensure the safety of their agent in the region, considering the fate of the ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Louay Mokdad, FSA's media and political coordinator, said earlier that Assad seeks to "create an atmosphere of terrorism through these terrorist bombings fitting well with his political agenda ahead of Geneva II, instead of releasing detainees and the opening of humanitarian corridors and other requirements that are able to ensure the success of the international efforts to bring about a political solution." Abdul Basit Sida, political committee member, described the clichéd talk about terrorism reiterated by Iran, the

Iraqi government and the Assad regime ahead of Geneva II as "immoral attempts by the Assad regime to hammer home his political agenda at the international conference, after the Assad regime and its allies declared that the primary objective of the conference is fighting terrorism and not handing over of power." Sida also said that the Assad regime "not only kills the Syrian people to hold on to power, but also starts killing the Russian and the Lebanese people to mislead the international community and the entire world to persuade them that the real conflict in Syria is with terrorism and not with the Syrian people." Sida was referring to the terrorist bombings that hit Russian and southern Beirut, one of Hezbollah's most important strongholds.

"Al-Maleh: Recognition of Geneva I by Iran Necessary for Geneva II Participation," [National Coalition](#), 23:43, 7 Jan 2014.

My comment on this propaganda from the Coalition:

- The Coalition totally ignored their own failure to make a decision about attending Geneva2.
- The Coalition begins their propaganda by asserting that "the Assad regime is against going to Geneva II". This is complete rubbish. The Assad regime is committed to attending Geneva2. Moreover, Assad can speak for himself, he does not need disorganized rebels to speak for him.
- As I pointed out in my [second](#) essay on Syria, Geneva1 had *no* participation by anyone from Syria — neither Assad's government, nor rebels. Therefore, the Geneva1 Communiqué is an attempt by foreign meddlers to impose their decisions on the people of Syria, something that is *undemocratic* and unjust. Geneva2 should start fresh, and ignore Geneva1.
- Maleh, the head of the Coalition's legal committee, says: "we simply will not go to Geneva II to negotiate with someone who is occupying our country." The Truth is that Assad is the lawful ruler of Syria, and the rebels are fighting against the legitimate government of Syria. That is why they are called rebels.
- Sida asserts that Assad has made an "immoral attempt" to change the topic from the resignation of Assad to "fighting terrorism". I'm not sure what is immoral about Assad's attempt to put his conduct in the best possible light. While the Coalition held its two days of discussions in Turkey about participation in Geneva2, rebels/jihadists in Syria were [fighting](#) against ISIL, an Al-Qaeda terrorist organization. On 6 Jan, the Coalition issued a [news](#) statement that supported the rebellion against ISIL. Furthermore, the bombing in Beirut was claimed by ISIL, *not* the responsibility of Assad. The Truth is that there are terrorists operating in Syria.

My comment on inability to decide

A boycott of Geneva2 by the Coalition would be catastrophic for Geneva2, because the Coalition is the *only* opposition to Assad that was invited to Geneva2. The meeting of many

nations on 22 Jan in Montreux could continue as scheduled, but there would be meetings between Assad's government and an empty table in Geneva beginning 24 Jan, because *none* of the rebels, jihadists, or Al-Qaeda want to discuss peace.

In my [second](#) essay on Syria, I expressed my opinion that the Coalition was unfit to lead Syria because of their repeated delay in making a decision about whether to attend Geneva2. While there is much symbolism in attending a peace conference with one's adversary, it is really a benign decision. No harm would come to the Coalition for attending, and something good *might* come from Geneva2. In the balance between (1) continuing deaths of Syrian people at approximately 5000/month and (2) a few unpleasant days in Geneva, the Coalition should choose to participate in Geneva2.

One of the preconditions of the Coalition for their attending Geneva2 was that Iran be excluded from Geneva2. So the USA refused to allow Iran to receive an invitation to Geneva2, apparently to honor the Coalition's demand. But now it seems that the Coalition may decide to boycott Geneva2, even though their demand of nonparticipation by Iran was satisfied.

Note also that on 11 Nov 2013, the Coalition agreed to attend Geneva2, but with a disorganized list of preconditions. Now the Coalition is demanding *new* preconditions. The new conditions are irrelevant, because none of the previous conditions (except nonattendance of Iran) have been satisfied. The Syrian National Coalition is an impediment to peace in Syria, and unworthy of leading a future Syrian government.

The continuing inability of the Coalition to make a decision about attending Geneva2 suggests to me that the Coalition should be relegated to the children's table on the sidelines of any international conference. The Coalition can not be taken seriously, with its inability to make decisions and its dwindling importance in Syria.

6 Jan 2014

UN issues invitations to Geneva2

Invitations to Geneva2 were scheduled to be issued on 28 Dec 2013. The "first round" of invitations were actually issued on 6 Jan 2014, and Iran was *not* included in the first-round invitees. The United Nations said: "The list of invitees was determined at the 20 December Trilateral meeting between the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Nations." In other words, it took 17 days to issue the first-round of invitations. No explanation was given for the delay. "Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on the Geneva Conference on Syria," [UN](#), 6 Jan 2014; "UN: Iran Not Yet Invited To Syria Peace Talks," [Associated Press](#), 15:12 EST, 6 Jan 2014.

7 Jan 2014

United Nations stops counting dead Syrians

As diplomacy continues to fail in the nearly three-year Syrian civil war, the United Nations today announced it would stop counting dead Syrians. The official reason was that poor security on the ground in Syria means that the United Nations can no longer verify the accuracy of information on casualties. [Associated Press](#), 7 Jan 2014. Incidentally, I searched the United Nations websites in both Geneva and New York, but found nothing on this news at the UN websites.

The last count by the United Nations was on 25 July 2013, when the UN estimated at least 100,000 dead in the Syrian civil war. [BBC](#), 25 July 2013.

Fortunately, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights still issues estimates at the end of each month, so we are reminded of the human costs of the failure of diplomacy to end this war. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recently estimated that 130,433 people had died in the Syrian civil war from 18 March 2011 up to 30 Dec 2013. [SOHR](#), 1 Jan 2014.

Syrian National Coalition on Brink of Collapse

On 9 Jan 2014, the Associated Press reported:

Two weeks ahead of an international peace conference on Syria, the country's main Western-backed opposition group stands on the brink of collapse, dragged down by outside pressures, infighting and deep disagreements over the basic question of whether to talk to President Bashar Assad.

The crisis in the Syrian National Coalition raises further doubts about the so-called Geneva conference, which is set to open Jan. 22 in Montreux, Switzerland. The prospects for a successful outcome at the talks appear bleak at best: Assad has said he will not hand over power, and the opposition — if it decides to attend — is in no position to force concessions from him.

....

"Geneva is proving to be a road to ruin for the so-called moderate opposition, both the political and military aspects," said Salman Shaikh, director of the Brookings Doha Center.

The various competing factions that make up the Coalition are under intense international pressure to attend, Shaikh said, all the while knowing that "if they do, they may very well be entering into a very ill-defined and ill-prepared conference that may not produce anything that they can show to their brethren inside Syria, and further diminish their credibility."

The issue of credibility has haunted the Coalition since its creation just over a year ago. The umbrella group was forged under international pressure for a stronger, more united body to serve as a counterweight to the extremist forces fighting the Assad government.

But the Coalition has never coalesced into the unified and effective leadership outside powers, including the United States and its Arab allies, envisioned, while the rebels and activists inside Syria have accused the opposition-in-exile of being ineffectual and out of touch.

Some of the Coalition's struggles have not been entirely of its own making, and the decision of whether to attend the peace conference has laid bare the group's internal contradictions.

The Coalition was never an organic organization that enjoyed broad popular support inside Syria from activists and fighters. Its legitimacy has always flowed from its foreign patrons.

The group could have boosted its credibility with its detractors inside Syria by securing concrete international support — especially weapons — from its allies. But those sponsors routinely balked, fearful that any arms they provided might fall into the hands of the Islamic extremists who have become a dominant force among the armed opposition.

Ryan Lucas & Zeina Karam, "Syrian Opposition Group On Brink Of Collapse," [Associated Press](#), 15:00 EST, 9 Jan 2014.

On 17 Jan 2014, *The Washington Post* reported:

Syria's opposition coalition was at risk of collapse Friday [17 Jan] as international pressure mounted on the deeply divided body to attend landmark peace talks next week that many regime opponents fear will only reinforce President Bashar al-Assad's hold on power.

....

... the Syrian Opposition Coalition, which had been scheduled to vote Friday [17 Jan] on whether to attend the talks [in Geneva]. Instead, the group, meeting at a secret location on the outskirts of Istanbul, postponed a vote until Saturday amid disputes over procedures. The skirmishing exposed the extent of the coalition's failure to present a coherent alternative to Assad's rule since it was formed more than a year ago.

....

The coalition's ineptitude has cost it the support of most ordinary Syrians as well as a majority of the armed rebel groups, making it unclear who exactly the coalition will represent if it does attend the talks.

Liz Sly and Anne Gearan, "Syrian opposition at risk of collapse over peace talks," [Washington Post](#), 17 Jan 2014.

9-10 Jan 2014
Syrian rebels and jihadists meet

On 9-10 Jan, members of the Syrian National Coalition met with representatives of the Islamic Front, Free Syrian Army, and various other opposition groups in Cordoba, Spain.

Reuters reported on 9 Jan:

Prospects for progress at the talks in Switzerland [Geneva2] appear dim. Assad, buttressed by recent military gains and a wave of rebel infighting, has flatly ruled out demands from the weakened opposition that he stand aside.

....

Diplomats say the gathering is recognition that the divided National Coalition — which has yet to formally accept an invitation to attend Geneva 2 — is losing influence on the ground and a more comprehensive grouping is needed ahead of the talks.

....

Assad's forces have recently been gaining ground against rebel fighters backed by the opposition and he faces little pressure to make concessions. At the same time, radical Islamists distrusted by the West have taken a bigger role in the campaign to oust Assad.

Oliver Holmes, "Syria opposition holds first 'unified' meet ahead of peace talks," [Reuters](#), 11:51 GMT, 9 Jan 2014.

See also: [Al-Arabiya](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); both on 9 Jan 2014.

Obviously, this meeting of many different opposition groups *should* have been held many months ago, instead of less than two weeks before Geneva2 begins. This delay is another example of poor planning by the Syrian National Coalition.

After the meeting in Cordoba concluded, Reuters reported:

Several factions of the Syrian opposition, meeting together for the first time, called on Friday [10 Jan] for a new coalition but did not reach agreement on who should attend peace talks later this month, or whether they would attend at all.

....

A final communique from the meeting proposes setting up a committee to coordinate opposition groups, with the eventual goal of holding a national conference attended by about 1,000 people, said Yahya al-Aridi, a spokesman for the meeting.

"That is the endeavor: to focus on finding people, who have differences, but at the same time they have one common goal," he said. He added that the new committee would not be a political body, suggesting it would not replace the National Coalition, which Western and Arab countries see as the official opposition.

Oliver Holmes And Tracy Rucinski, "Syria opposition groups say share goals, but no agreement for talks," [Reuters](#), 15:30 GMT, 10 Jan 2014.

9 Jan 2014

U.S. considers resuming aid to FSA

On 7 Dec 2013, the Islamic Front stole many tons of supplies from a warehouse operated by the Free Syrian Army. As explained and discussed in my [second](#) essay on Syria, on 11 Dec 2013, the U.S. and U.K. governments announced they had suspended deliveries of supplies to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), as a result of the robbery. The commander of the FSA asked the Islamic Front to return the stolen supplies, but the Front's response was not published. On 9 Jan 2014, *The New York Times* reported that the U.S. government was considering resuming deliveries of supplies to the FSA:

The Obama administration is considering the resumption of nonlethal military aid to Syria's moderate opposition, senior administration officials said on Thursday [9 Jan], even if some of it ends up going to the Islamist groups that are allied with the moderates.

The United States suspended the shipments last month after warehouses of equipment were seized by the Islamic Front, a coalition of Islamist fighters that broke with the American-backed Free Syrian Army and has become an increasingly vital force in the nearly three-year-old uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

But as a result of the rapidly shifting alliances within Syria's fractured opposition, some of the Islamists fought alongside the Free Syrian Army in a battle against a major rebel group affiliated with Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

That has eased American qualms about resuming the aid, the officials said.

Restoring the aid, they said, would send a message of American support at a time when opposition groups are threatening to boycott a Jan. 22 peace conference out of concern that it will only serve to tighten Mr. Assad's grip on power and discredit them at home. Mark Landler, "U.S. Considers Resuming Nonlethal Aid to Syrian Opposition," [NY Times](#), 9 Jan 2014.

See also [Al-Bawaba](#); [Al-Arabiya](#); 10 Jan 2014.

Remarkably this topic was *not* mentioned at the 10 Jan U.S. State Department [Briefing](#).

My comments: For the past week (3-10 Jan), the Islamic Front and FSA are united in fighting against ISIL. But once the fight against ISIL ends, the Islamic Front will continue pushing for an orthodox Islamic state in Syria, while the weaker FSA desires a secular Syrian state. Imposing *one* religion on everyone in a nation is a very bad idea. That means the Islamic Front is *not* worthy of support by secular governments in the USA and Western Europe. One week of cooperation on one goal does not make a long-term ally, when there are fundamentally different values between the two groups.

For the following reasons, I think it is time for the USA to end support of both the National Coalition and FSA — and at least politically support Assad in his fight against Islamic terrorists, including Al-Qaeda.

- After the debacle by the Syrian National Coalition — the political group aligned with the FSA — over their inability to decide whether to attend Geneva2, it is clear that the National Coalition is *not* capable of operating a government that needs to make difficult decisions.
- The FSA is weak, and has failed to capture significant territory from Assad's government. And the FSA appears to be growing weaker. The FSA, like anyone else, needs to deliver positive results to make it worthy of continued support.
- After almost three years of civil war, a military victory for the rebels in the FSA appears very unlikely. One reason that the civil war lasted so long, and killed so many people, is that foreign meddlers sent munitions into Syria in support of their favorite party. Stopping the flow of foreign munitions, and other supplies, will help end the civil war.
- The most important concern now is that either Al-Qaeda or the jihadists will establish a base in Syria, from which they can send terrorists to various nations worldwide. (See [NY Times](#), 9 Jan 2014, for just one report of such concerns.) Assad is the only person who can defeat these terrorists: Assad is in the right location, has a robust military, proven strong leadership, and Assad is ruthless against his enemies.
- At a time when the U.S. government has not balanced its budget in many years, there ought to be a reluctance to throw money away on "nonlethal supplies" and "military aid" to people who are not deserving. The USA is already paying to destroy Syria's chemical weapons at sea, in the modified M.V. Cape Ray, and that should be enough contribution to the Syrian civil war.

On 27 Jan 2014, the Associated Press reported the resumption of aid from the USA to the rebels:

The United States has restarted deliveries of nonlethal aid to the Syrian opposition, officials said Monday [27 Jan], more than a month after al-Qaida-linked militants seized warehouses and prompted a sudden cutoff of Western supplies to the rebels.

....

[The resumption of aid] could also be seen as a U.S. reward to the opposition for its participation in ongoing peace talks with President Bashar Assad's government in Geneva.

The U.S. officials, who weren't authorized to speak publicly on the matter and demanded anonymity, said the aid was being sent through Turkey into Syria, with the coordination of the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council, led by Gen. Salim Idris, a secular-minded, Western-backed moderate.

Bradley Klapper, "US Resumes Nonlethal Aid To Syrian Opposition," [Associated Press](#), 03:12 EST, 27 Jan 2014.

In a separate arrangement, the U.S. government has resumed supplying small arms and

ammunition to rebels in Syria. Reuters reports:

Light arms supplied by the United States are flowing to "moderate" Syrian rebel factions in the south of the country and U.S. funding for months of further deliveries has been approved by Congress, according U.S. and European security officials.

The weapons, most of which are moving to non-Islamist Syrian rebels via Jordan, include a variety of small arms, as well as some more powerful weapons, such as anti-tank rockets.

The deliveries do not include weapons such as shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles, known as MANPADs, which could shoot down military or civilian aircraft, the officials said.

The weapons deliveries have been funded by the U.S. Congress, in votes behind closed doors, through the end of government fiscal year 2014, which ends on September 30, two officials said.

The apparently steady weapons flow contrasts with the situation last summer, when lethal U.S. aid to the Syrian rebels dried up for a time due to congressional reservations.

Congressional committees held up weapons deliveries for months over fears that U.S. arms would not prove decisive in the rebels' efforts to oust President Bashar Assad and his government and could well end up in the hands of Islamist militants.

....

Congress approved funding for weapons deliveries to the Syrian rebels in classified sections of defense appropriations legislation, two sources familiar with the matter said. It was not clear when the funding was approved,

....

Yet, officials who support providing U.S. arms to the rebels acknowledge that this has not greatly increased U.S. expectations of victory by anti-Assad forces, whether moderate or militant.

"The Syrian war is a stalemate. The rebels lack the organization and weapons to defeat Assad; the regime lacks the loyal manpower to suppress the rebellion. Both sides' external allies... are ready to supply enough money and arms to fuel the stalemate for the foreseeable future," said Bruce Riedel, a former senior CIA analyst and sometime foreign policy adviser to President Barack Obama.

Both U.S. and European officials said that "moderate" rebels had recently consolidated their positions in the Syrian south, where they are pushing out elements linked to al-Qaeda. More militant factions remain dominant in the north and east.

....

As for "non-lethal" aid like communications and transportation equipment, the United States hopes to resume deliveries to moderate groups in Syria soon, a U.S. official said on Monday [27 Jan].

The United States and Britain suspended non-lethal aid to northern Syria in December after reports that Islamist fighters seized Western-backed rebel weapons warehouses, highlighting fears that supplies could end up in hostile hands.

"We hope to be able to resume assistance to the SMC shortly, pending security and logistics considerations," said the official, referring to the Supreme Military Council moderate rebel group. "But we have no announcements at this time," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Non-lethal aid was resumed to civilian groups in that region in late December. Mark Hosenball, "Congress secretly approves U.S. weapons flow to 'moderate' Syrian rebels," [Reuters](#), 22:35 GMT, 27 Jan 2014. See also [Al-Arabiya](#), 07:19 GMT, 28 Jan 2014.

"low expectations" for Geneva2

On 11 Jan 2014, the Associated Press reported:

In its last-ditch attempt to get moderate Syrian opposition groups to the negotiating table, the Obama administration faces the prospect that a no-show wouldn't be such a bad thing.

With less than two weeks to go before a long-planned peace conference in Switzerland, the main Western-backed moderate political group seeking to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad has still not decided if it will attend. It's the latest frustration for the U.S. and allies who have spent the last 18 months trying to negotiate a transition of power from Assad to a new, representative government.

But even if the Syrian National Coalition agrees to attend the Jan. 22 peace meeting — as Secretary of State John Kerry will push this weekend in Paris with the coalition's newly re-elected president — analysts say it does not have enough credibility with other Syrian groups to sit as an official counterbalance to Assad's regime. And it might not matter, in the long run, if they don't show.

....

Coalition council President Ahmad al-Jarba, who was re-elected last week, heads a shaky alliance of opposition groups that is sharply divided on whether to attend the conference, designed to begin a negotiated peace after three years of civil war.

At least 45 members have temporarily suspended their membership over the impasse.

Most of its leaders are in exile outside of Syria and have been accused by rebel fighters and other activists inside the war-torn country of being ineffective and out of touch. Lara Jakes, "Low Expectations For Syrian Peace Talks," [Associated Press](#), 03:20 EST, 11 Jan 2014.

On 20 Jan 2014, the Associated Press reported:

But a larger question looms over the whole endeavor: How can the opposition, represented by the Syrian National Coalition, enforce any agreement reached in Geneva?

The umbrella group, which draws together various anti-government factions, is in disarray and has little credibility with rebels inside Syria and no sway over the most powerful armed groups — including Islamic extremists — who have publicly rejected negotiating with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Ryan Lucas, "Syria Talks Set To Open Amid Low Expectations," [Associated Press](#), 04:22 EST, 20 Jan 2014.

My comment: Articles like these inspire pessimism and make failure of negotiations a self-fulfilling prophecy. Everyone needs to go into negotiations with optimism for the success of the discussions. On the other hand, realism tells us that success of Geneva2 is more likely for Assad than for the Coalition, because Assad is winning militarily.

My suggestion is that *if* Geneva2 fails to produce results that satisfy the U.S. State Department, then the USA should blame the Syrian National Coalition. In response to this blame, the USA should end all aid to the Coalition and end political support to the Coalition. It is already months past the time that the USA should have abandoned the Syrian National Coalition for its antics over refusing to agree, without preconditions, to attend Geneva2.

12 Jan 2014 Paris meeting

A group of foreign ministers from the "Friends of Syria" — Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the USA — met in Paris on 12 Jan with representatives from the Syrian National Coalition. The plain purpose of the meeting was to persuade the Coalition to attend Geneva2.

france24.com reported:

"There will be no political solution for Syria unless 'Geneva 2' meets," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said on behalf of the group.

The internationally sponsored meeting aims to bring Assad's government and opposition groups to the negotiating table.

In a statement issued at the end of Sunday's talks, the 11-nation Friends of Syria urged the opposition to respond positively to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's invitation

to send a delegation to the talks in Montreux. The grouping of Western-backed rebels is deeply divided on whether to go and will announce a decision on January 17.

....

Coalition President Ahmed al-Jarba, who attended the Paris meeting, did not say whether he believed the coalition would send a delegation, but said he was reassured that the 11 nations had agreed that there could be no transition if Assad remained in power.

"We are all in agreement to say that Assad has no future in Syria," he said.
"Friends of Syria' urge opposition to attend Geneva peace talks," france24.com, 17:02 on 12 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported:

The "Friends of Syria", an alliance of mainly Western and Gulf Arab countries who oppose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, urged opposition groups on Sunday [12 Jan] to attend this month's peace talks, saying there was no alternative for a political solution.

"There is no other political solution," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said on behalf of the group. "There will be no political solution for Syria unless 'Geneva 2' meets."

....

Coalition President Ahmed al-Jarba, who attended the Paris meeting, did not say whether he believed the Coalition would send a delegation, but said he was reassured that the 11 nations had agreed that there could be no transition if Assad remained in power.

"We are all in agreement to say that Assad has no future in Syria," he said.
"Friends of Syria group urges opposition to attend Geneva talks," Reuters, 16:27 GMT, 12 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reported:

Allies of the main Western-backed Syrian opposition group ramped up pressure Sunday [12 Jan] for peace talks that would finally bring it face-to-face with the Syrian government it wants to overthrow.

The two-day series of meetings in Paris came a week [actually 10 days] before the scheduled talks in Switzerland, as the Syrian National Coalition nears collapse, its influence sapped by chronic infighting, international pressure and disagreement over whether to negotiate with Syria's president, Bashar Assad.

....

Within Syria, the moderate rebels say the coalition-in-exile is little help as they find themselves battling on two fronts — against al-Qaida linked militants on one side and Assad's forces on another. One brigade after another has broken with the group, calling it out of touch with the harsh reality of a war that activists say has killed more than 130,000 people.

Assad himself has said there will be no discussion of giving up power, throwing the entire premise of the peace talks into doubt. On the other side, the rebel groups with the most men, arms and territory have already rejected any idea of an armistice. Sunday's declaration released by the 11 envoys included an explicit request for the Syrian National Coalition to accept the invitation to the peace talks.

....

The indecision and weakness of the Syrian coalition also has tested the patience of its backers, including the U.S.

Lara Jakes & Lori Hinnant, "Top Envoys Insist Syria Peace Talks Must Proceed," [Associated Press](#), 16:55 GMT, 12 Jan 2014.

Note that the Paris meeting of "Friends of Syria" was *only one day*, 12 Jan, and they issued their final communiqué on 12 Jan. The meetings in Paris on 13 Jan were organized by the United Nations, as described below.

See also:

- "'Friends of Syria' peace talks at Paris crossroads," [Al-Arabiya](#).
- "'Friends of Syria' says talks only option," [Al-Jazeera](#).
- "Friends of Syria: no future for Assad," [Al-Bawaba](#). ("On Sunday [12 Jan], U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry led a bid to drag Syria's opposition forces into peace talks with Assad's regime.")
- "Friends of Syria agree no future for Assad," [Al-Arabiya](#).
- "Syria opposition pressed to attend talks," [Al-Jazeera](#).

all on 12 Jan 2014.

My comment: This rhetoric about no future for Assad in Syria may come back to bite these foreign ministers when they beg Assad to defeat Islamic terrorists in Syria, to protect Western Civilization and neighboring Arab lands.

12 Jan 2014 Paris Communiqué

Official copy of the [Communiqué](#).

My comment: There are many objectionable things about this Communiqué. Coming less than two weeks before Geneva2, this document purports to decide many of the issues that

should be discussed and resolved at Geneva2.

As I discussed in my [second](#) essay on Syria, the requirement for "a transitional governing body (TGB)" in Syria was decided at Geneva1, a conference where *no one* from Syria — neither rebels nor Assad's government — participated. As a result, the transitional government is something pushed by foreign meddlers on Syria, in an *undemocratic* move. Moreover, the demand for a transitional government in which "Assad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no role in Syria" (§7 of Communiqué) frustrates discussions at Geneva2, because Assad clearly will *not* relinquish power at this time.

Turning to the specific content of the Paris Communiqué, consider just one paragraph of this document, which says:

We therefore strongly condemn the latest statements of the regime, by which it refused to come to Geneva to establish a political transition. These statements fully contradict the Geneva Communiqué, endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2118, to which the regime must commit. In addition, the perspective of a presidential election organized by the regime, in which Bashar al-Assad would run, also fully contradicts the Geneva II process and its goal of a negotiated democratic transition. Such a parody of a ballot, aimed at maintaining in power a man whom the UN considers committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, would only fuel the conflict and increase the threat of a partition of the country. If it were to happen, we would consider it totally null and void.

¶6 of Communiqué, 12 Jan 2014.

That is quite a blast of propaganda! They condemned an election ("fully contradicts" "parody of a ballot") *before* the election occurred, and before any facts were documented. They conclude Assad is guilty of "war crimes and crimes against humanity", even though Assad has *not* been charged in any court, and Assad has definitely *not* been found guilty in a court of law. For those reasons, they declare any election in Syria organized by Assad's government as "totally null and void."

Governments throughout the world routinely operate fair elections in which their current executive is a candidate for re-election. Such elections must be judged on facts, *not* prejudice and *not* fear of fraud.

According to this Paris document, the *only* acceptable government for Syria is "a negotiated democratic transition" — *not* free and fair elections by the Syrian people. The "negotiated" requirement allows foreign meddlers to impose a government — the dysfunctional Syrian National Coalition — on the people of Syria.

The foreign meddlers at the Paris conference see the number one problem as the removal of Assad and the substitution of a transitional government in Syria. Instead, I see the number one problem as a ceasefire that ends the civil war. Following the ceasefire, it would be desirable to reintegrate the rebels into the Syrian army, make improvements in Syria's constitution, and defeat the jihadists and Al-Qaeda in Syria. (See my comments in the section titled "Abandon Transitional Government?" for 25 Nov 2013 in my [second](#) essay on Syria.)

The outrageous propaganda in the Paris Communiqué may have been intended for consumption only by the Syrian National Coalition, in an attempt to persuade the Coalition to attend Geneva2. If this Communiqué has any other purpose, it should be condemned as undemocratic, and an attempt to unilaterally decide issues that should be discussed by *all* relevant parties.

13 Jan 2014
Confidence-Building Measures

On 13 Jan 2014, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, United Nations envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, and U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, met in Paris. Amongst other things, they discussed proposed ceasefires, delivery of humanitarian aid, prisoner exchanges, and other confidence-building measures in Syria.

Afterwards, Kerry met in Paris with newly reelected National Coalition President, Ahmad al-Jarba, to persuade the rebels to arrange these confidence-building measures.

At the end of the day, Reuters reported:

Syria's government and some rebels may be willing to permit humanitarian aid to flow, enforce local ceasefires and take other confidence-building measures in the nearly three-year-old civil war, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said on Monday [13 Jan].

Kerry said that he and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov "talked today about the possibility of trying to encourage a ceasefire. Maybe a localized ceasefire, beginning with Aleppo," Syria's largest city. "And both of us have agreed to try to work to see if that could be achieved."

Syrian rebels backed by Washington have agreed that, if the government commits to such a partial ceasefire, "they would live up to it", Kerry said.

Given the history of failed attempts to end the war, which has killed more than 100,000 people and displaced millions, it remains far from clear that even a partial ceasefire can be achieved or, if it is, can hold.

It also seems unlikely to be honored by powerful militant Islamist rebel factions, some of whom are at war with both Damascus and other rebel groups backed by the West and Gulf states.

But diplomats are trying to persuade the combatants to agree to a series of steps to improve the atmosphere for Syrian peace talks planned for Switzerland on January 22. Warren Strobel, "U.S. and Russia say Syria aid access and local ceasefire possible," [Reuters](#), 20:49 GMT, 13 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reported:

In a first yet fragile step toward peace, Syria's government and the main but disputed moderate opposition group seeking to oust it have agreed to allow humanitarian aid into some blocked-off parts of the scarred Mideast country.

The agreement was announced by the top envoys for the U.S. and Russia, who together are working the opposite sides to broker progress in any possible way to ease the bloody strife that has engulfed Syria for nearly three years without an end in sight.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are still pushing for a cease-fire in local pockets around the country and a prisoner exchange, which they said would help set the tone for compromise in the run-up to a peace conference scheduled for next week.

Both men grimly conceded that a final settlement for both sides to build a new government would happen no time soon — if ever.

....

The peace process has been beset in recent weeks by chaos within the Western-backed opposition group, known as the Syrian National Coalition, which is one of the only alliances of rebel fighters and political leaders willing to deal with Syrian President Bashar Assad's government. The coalition is in exile, and has lost widespread credibility within its ranks and among rival opposition officials and rebel groups in Syria who have broken away and are fighting for the upper hand against al-Qaida-linked militants.

....

[Lavrov] said the moderate opposition coalition has agreed to enforce a cease-fire in places they can control, including Aleppo, the country's largest city, but suggested the militants would not abide by one.

The Syrian National Coalition is deeply divided over whether to attend peace talks scheduled for Jan. 22 in Montreux, Switzerland, and will vote later this week to decide. The group's president, Ahmad al-Jarba, met with Kerry on Monday [13 Jan] for the second time in as many days as the United States made clear that the coalition must show up or suffer a severe credibility hit within the Western world.

Lara Jakes & Lori Hinnant, "Militants Threaten Fragile Step To Syrian Peace," [Associated Press](#), 19:28 GMT, 13 Jan 2014.

In Russia, RIA-Novosti reported:

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry called for a partial ceasefire in Syria and an increase in the flow of international aid to the embattled nation during a meeting in Paris on Monday [13 Jan].

"We talked today about the possibility of trying to encourage a ceasefire. Maybe a localized ceasefire in Aleppo," Kerry told journalists after the talks.

The Russian and US foreign ministers were meeting with Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN and Arab League special envoy for Syria, to discuss preparations for the upcoming

Syria peace talks due to be held in Switzerland on January 22.

Lavrov said the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria was "above all disrupted by insurgents. They have killed 32 international aid workers so far."

Russia's top diplomat said the Syrian government would guarantee the safety of an upcoming humanitarian aid convoy being sent to a Palestinian refugee camp.
"Russia, US Push for Ceasefire and Increased Aid in Syria," [RIA-Novosti](#), 13 Jan 2014.

[france24.com](#) reported:

In Paris for two days of meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Kerry told reporters that he and Lavrov "talked today about the possibility of trying to encourage a ceasefire", beginning in Aleppo, Syria's largest city.

US-backed Syrian rebels have agreed that if the government commits to a ceasefire, "they would live up to it", Kerry said.

Given the history of failed attempts to end the war, which has killed more than 100,000 people in Syria and displaced millions more, it remains to be seen whether a partial ceasefire can be achieved or, if it is achieved, whether it can hold.

It also seems unlikely to be honoured by powerful Islamist rebel factions, some of whom are at war with both the Assad regime and other rebel groups backed by the West and Gulf states.

But diplomats are trying to persuade those rebels to agree to a series of steps to facilitate Syrian peace talks slated to be held in Montreux, Switzerland, on January 22.
"US, Russia say Syria aid and ceasefire are possible," [france24.com](#), 13 Jan 2014.

My opinion: We will see if the Syrian National Coalition has enough influence with rebel and jihadist groups to establish ceasefires and other confidence-building measures. The Associated Press is surely correct in saying that the Coalition "has lost widespread credibility ... among rival opposition officials and rebel groups in Syria", so the Coalition may not be able to deliver ceasefires or other confidence-building measures. Nonetheless, it is important to attempt these confidence-building measures, as a foothold to resolution of the Syrian civil war.

15 Jan 2014

Are Western European Governments Secretly Meeting With Assad?

While politicians and diplomats in Western Europe continue to call for Assad to resign, the Syrian government *claims* that intelligence and security agencies in those same countries are contacting the Assad government and offering cooperation. The BBC reports the Syrian deputy foreign minister said "many Western governments had finally understood that there was no alternative to the leadership of President Assad." [BBC](#), 15 Jan 2014. *Al-Bawaba* reports the BBC interview. [Al-Bawaba](#), 15 Jan 2014.

It is *not known* whether the Syrian deputy foreign minister is completely truthful. However, reputable journalists reported that British, German, French, and Spanish intelligence officers had secret meetings with Assad's government about at least 1200 Europeans fighting inside Syria against Assad. [Wall Street Journal](#), 14 Jan 2014, and [NY Times](#), 15 Jan 2014.

The U.S. State Department vigorously denied that the U.S. government considered Assad a partner in the war against terror. [Asharq Al-Awsat](#) and [Al-Bawaba](#), both on 16 Jan 2014.

16-17 Jan 2014

Syrian Government Accepts Confidence-Building Measures

In response to the confidence-building measures proposed on 13 Jan, the Syrian government on 16 Jan allowed humanitarian aid to reach two disputed areas near Damascus. [Associated Press](#), 19:51 GMT, 16 Jan 2014.

On 17 Jan, the Syrian government proposed a ceasefire in Aleppo, a prisoner exchange, and the opening of humanitarian corridors in Syria. [Al-Jazeera](#), [Al-Bawaba](#), [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#), all on 17 Jan 2014. [Arab News](#), 18 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press says the Syrian "government has agreed 'in principle' to release prisoners from Syrian jails in exchange for people kidnapped by armed groups, but ... there needs to be an exchange of lists and a mechanism for implementation."

In regard to the proposed ceasefire in Aleppo, the Associated Press wisely notes: "There are also questions as to whether such a truce is even remotely possible in a city where an array of armed rebel groups with no unified command is locked in a bloody stalemate with government troops." [Associated Press](#), 17 Jan 2014. In my opinion, the disorganization — "no unified command" — is a serious failure by the rebels and jihadists. If they can not organize a local ceasefire, how can they pretend to operate a national government of Syria?

I have been checking the English-language websites of three major Arab news organizations (i.e., *Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya*, and *Al-Bawaba*.) plus the websites of Reuters and the Associated Press, each several times a day, but — as of the night on 21 Jan — I have seen no mention of any response to these confidence-building measures by either the rebels or jihadists. Indeed, the rebels were busy deciding whether or not to attend Geneva2, selecting delegates to Geneva2, and issuing an ultimatum to the United Nations, as described [below](#).

On 22 Jan, Reuters reported:

Last week [17 Jan], Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem said he had handed Russia plans for a ceasefire with rebel forces in Aleppo as a potential confidence-building measure between the warring sides.

But no such agreement was reached before the Syrian government delegation flew to Switzerland on Tuesday [21 Jan] for a peace conference attended by world powers and the Western-backed opposition. Most rebel groups are not represented at the talks. STEPHEN KALIN, "Syria hails Aleppo airport reopening as a victory over rebels," [Reuters](#),

15:06 GMT, 22 Jan 2014.

Hint of Syrian position at Geneva2

Al-Jazeera obtained a copy of the 8 Jan letter from the Syrian foreign minister to the United Nations Secretary General, in which Syria accepts the invitation to Geneva2. The letter effectively says that Syria does not accept the goal of establishing a transitional government in Syria, instead Syria says the goal is to "fight terrorism". [Al-Jazeera](#), 16 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera translated the letter into English:

To: Mr. Ban Ki-Moon
United Nations Secretary General — New York

I have examined your letter dated 06.01.2013 containing an invitation to the Arab Republic of Syria to participate in Geneva Conference on 22.01.2014; and I am pleased to inform you that Syria will take part in the Conference.

Kindly find attached a list of names of the participating delegation together with other experts and the media representatives; while it should be noted that we do not agree with certain points mentioned in the letter, simply for the reason that they are in conflict with the legal and political position of the State of Syria; nor do they meet the supreme interests of the Syrian people. It remains as the priority to the Syrian people to continue to fight terrorism which undermines the existence of our people; to continue to drain the sources of terrorism; and we also demand the countries supporting terrorism to cease and refrain from funding, training, arming or harbouring terrorist groups in harmony with the International Law and the UN resolutions.

With due respect.
Waleed Al Mualim
Deputy Prime Minister
Minister of Foreign Affairs

08.01.2014

Al-Jazeera [Translation](#) of 8 Jan letter, 16 Jan 2014.

In my opinion, the Syrian "demand the countries supporting terrorism to cease and refrain from funding, training, arming or harbouring terrorist groups in harmony with the International Law and the UN resolutions" is quite reasonable, especially when compared with the long list of demands by the Syrian National Coalition.

17 Jan 2014 Kerry says veto at Geneva2

On 16 Jan, U.S. secretary of state, John Kerry, said both the Assad government and the

Syrian National Coalition would be able to veto names suggested as the leader of the transitional government in Syria. Kerry says there will be "mutual consent" to the leader of the transitional government of Syria. [Al-Arabiya](#), [Al-Bawaba](#), both on 17 Jan 2014.

In my opinion, such a veto is ridiculous. Assad is *not* going to resign anytime soon. The Syrian National Coalition will *not* accept Assad as leader of Syria. The concept of a transitional government is an illusion that will *not* happen at Geneva2. As I said above, Geneva2 should be focused on establishing a ceasefire, *not* a transitional government. The leader of Syria should be selected by the people of Syria, voting in free and fair elections.

Because the Syrian National Coalition has *not yet* decided whether to attend Geneva2, Kerry's offer of a veto to the Coalition is seen as some kind of encouragement for the Coalition to decide to attend Geneva2, and also a rejection of the Syrian position in their 8 Jan letter accepting the invitation to attend Geneva2. [Reuters](#), 17 Jan 2014.

17-18 Jan 2014 Syrian National Coalition Decides to Attend Geneva2

More Delay

After at least three previous attempts (e.g., 1-3 Nov 2013, 9-11 Nov 2013, and 5-8 Jan 2014) to decide whether to attend Geneva2, the Syrian National Coalition postponed a decision until 17 Jan 2014. Inconsistently, on both 11 and 27 Nov 2013, the Coalition announced it would attend Geneva2, but with a long list of preconditions.

Given the importance of this decision, and given the numerous previous failures to decide, one might think the Coalition would make a sincere effort on 17 Jan. But the Associated Press reported:

The opposition Syrian National Coalition has yet to decide whether it will attend the peace talks scheduled to open Wednesday [22 Jan] in the Swiss city of Montreux. Members of the coalition gathered Friday [17 Jan] in Istanbul to vote on the group's participation, but the start of the meeting was delayed for at least 10 hours after dozens of representatives refused to show up.

The coalition is under immense pressure from its Western and Arab sponsors to go to Geneva. Many members, however, are hesitant to sign onto a conference that has little chance of success and will burn the last shred of credibility the group has with rebels on the ground, who reject the talks.

Ryan Lucas, "Syria Proposes Aleppo Cease-Fire, Prisoner Swap," [Associated Press](#), 20:17 GMT, 17 Jan 2014.

One remembers that the previous attempt by the Coalition to make a decision, 8 Jan, ended when 43 delegates walked out of the meeting. [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), [Associated Press](#), 9 Jan 2014.

An *Al-Jazeera* journalist observed: "Another legal tangle for [Syrian National Coalition]:

Founding Constitution stipulates no meeting with Assad regime. Some say Geneva2 can't happen unless changed." [Al-Jazeera](#), 17 Jan 2014. *The Washington Post* explained:

Friday's [17 Jan] failure to vote centered on a dispute over whether the coalition's founding principles, which state that there should be no negotiations with Assad, will have to be amended to enable attendance at Geneva. That would require a two-thirds majority of the members, which can't be mustered because 45 of them walked out this month.

Liz Sly and Anne Gearan, "Syrian opposition at risk of collapse over peace talks," [Washington Post](#), 17 Jan 2014.

See also [Al-Arabiya](#) (AFP), 18 Jan 2014.

My comments: First, a Constitution of a government in exile should *not* contain names of people and other ephemeral details, because a Constitution is intended to describe the basic structure of government and basic freedoms for the people. Second, if a hatred of Assad is all that unites the members of the Coalition, that would explain their disorganization and indecision on other topics. Third, this is bit late — 5 days before Geneva2 begins — to notice a Constitutional problem.

At night on 17 Jan, the decision whether to attend Geneva2 was postponed *again*. Agence France-Presse reported:

Syria's fractured opposition pushed back the opening of talks in Istanbul to Saturday [18 Jan] amid continuing differences over whether to attend peace talks with the government next week, sources said.

The talks of the opposition National Coalition had originally been due to get underway on Friday [17 Jan] but were postponed due to problems posed by some 40 delegates, Coalition spokesman Khaled Saleh said.

These delegates had threatened to resign at the last meeting of the Coalition 10 days earlier, concerned at the "lack of transparency" in the re-election this month of Ahmad Jarba, seen as close to key rebel backer Saudi Arabia, as National Coalition leader.

After intense negotiations Friday half of the unhappy delegates decided to participate in the opposition talks, which are now set to begin formally on Saturday morning in a hotel in an Istanbul suburb, a western diplomatic source said.

[Al-Jazeera](#), 17 Jan 2014. Also at [GlobalPost](#).

Against this record of delay, procrastination, and indecision by the Syrian National Coalition, contrast the positive leadership of Assad. The Syrian government has been consistently willing to attend Geneva2 since May 2013. [france24.com](#), 24 May 2013; [Associated Press](#), 29 May 2013. The blame for the delay in scheduling Geneva2 is solely the responsibility of the Syrian National Coalition.

Syrian National Coalition Votes to Attend Geneva2

At 17:23 GMT on 18 Jan, the Voice of Russia reported:

58 members of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces have voted in favor of taking part in the Geneva-2 conference, the SNC's press service announced. Another 14 members voted against it, two members abstained from voting and one ballot wasn't filled out, the press service notes.

....

The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has decided to take part in the international Geneva-2 peace conference, Fayez Sara, the SNC's deputy head, has said to Al Arabiya television. "It will be announced in two or three hours," he said.

"Syrian National Coalition votes in favor of taking part in Geneva-2 — SNC press service," [Voice of Russia](#), 21:23 Moscow time, 18 Jan 2014.

These results show only 75 members participated in the vote (counting the votes and abstentions, and also counting the blank ballot). *The New York Times* reported "Forty-four of the coalition's 119 active members withdrew in opposition before the vote and did not participate." This means only 49% of the total 119 active council members voted in favor of attending Geneva2. Most journalists ignored this problem of a disintegrating Coalition and a large number of absent council members.

Several journalists (e.g., [Associated Press](#)) quoted Jarba, president of the Coalition, saying after the vote:

[The Coalition is going to Geneva] without any bargain regarding the principles of the revolution and we will not be cheated by Assad's regime. The negotiating table for us is a track toward achieving the demands of the revolution — at the top of them removing the butcher from power.

My comments: The Coalition needs quickly to learn to use more diplomatic language than calling Assad "the butcher", if negotiations are to be successful. Also, the Coalition needs to stop making demands of Assad's government, as that is *not* how successful negotiations function. A negotiation is inherently a compromise. Geneva2 is *not* a surrender by Assad.

See: [rt.com](#), 17:20 GMT; [Associated Press](#), 17:33 GMT; [Al-Arabiya](#), 18:07 GMT [Al-Jazeera](#), [BBC](#), all on 18 Jan 2014.

Late at night on 18 Jan, Reuters reported:

Syria's main political opposition group in exile agreed on Saturday [18 Jan] to attend internationally sponsored peace talks, and said for the first time three rebel fighting forces also wanted to take part.

....

National Coalition spokesman Louay Safi told Reuters the Soldiers of the Levant, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and the Mujahideen Army all wanted "to have some representation within the delegation" at the talks on Wednesday [22 Jan] in Montreux.

....

A fourth fighting group, the Islamic Front — thought to be bigger than the other three combined — was still deciding whether to attend, Safi added.

Al Qaeda-linked rebels, increasingly involved in the fighting, have shown no interest in a political process.

The fractured National Coalition itself has little influence on the ground in Syria.

....

The Coalition decision had been delayed repeatedly as more than 40 members threatened to leave the body, and eventually shunned the vote.

One Coalition member, Khaled Khoja, told Reuters on Saturday that the vote was illegitimate and that his group was considering a formal challenge.

Dasha Afanasieva, "Syrian opposition to attend talks, backed by rebel fighters," [Reuters](#), 01:53 GMT, 19 Jan 2014.

The leading group of jihadists, the Islamic Front, rejected any participation in Geneva2. [Reuters](#), 00:45 GMT, 20 Jan 2014.

At 20:15 GMT on 19 Jan — 27 hours after the vote — the website of the Syrian National Coalition contained no mention of the historic vote to attend Geneva2. Early on 20 Jan in Turkey, the Coalition posted the following news item:

The Syrian Coalition approved going to Geneva II conference scheduled to begin in Switzerland this week. "The formation of a transitional ruling body with full powers will be at the top of the agenda of Geneva II," the Syrian Coalition head Ahmad Jarba said. Jarba also said that there must be a specific timeframe for the negotiations, stressing that it cannot be an open-ended process. Jarba also expressed the Coalition's support for a political solution that preserves the fundamentals of the Syrian revolution and that leads to the departure of Assad. He also said that the Coalition's delegation to Geneva II is almost ready and that the Coalition is going to consult with all other factions of the Syrian opposition before going to the conference. "The Assad regime must take the initiative and implement a cease-fire as a confidence-building step," Jarba stresses. The Syrian Coalition head accused Iran and Hezbollah of "carrying out criminal acts in Syria, Iran is present in Geneva through coordination with the Assad regime it but will not be at the negotiating table."

"Syrian National Coalition Agrees To Participate In Geneva II," [SNC](#), 00:37 Istanbul time, 20 Jan 2014. (22:37 GMT, 19 Jan)

Violation of Their Own Rules

A troublesome detail was overlooked by nearly all journalists who reported on the historic vote by the Syrian National Coalition.

The McClatchy News Service explained:

The vote in the 120-member coalition was 58 to 14 with two abstentions and two spoiled ballots. Forty-four members had walked out Friday, saying they wouldn't return to take part in a vote unless military commanders on the ground approved the decision.

....

Before the vote could be held, the coalition had to finesse its own bylaws, which stipulate that its leadership would not negotiate with the Syrian government. Amending the bylaws would have required a two-thirds vote of the entire membership, which was impossible because of Friday's walkout. Instead, the group's legal committee ruled that a majority vote would suffice though it was not clear how the committee reached that conclusion.

Roy Gutman, "Divided Syrian opposition agrees to send delegation to peace talks," [McClatchy](#), 18 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press cryptically reported: "Many members boycotted the Istanbul meetings that began on Friday, forcing the Coalition's legal committee to approve the decision in a simple majority vote." [Associated Press](#).

On the night of 20 Jan, the Syrian National Council withdrew its approximately forty members from the Coalition. That withdrawal probably ended any protest inside the Coalition over the violation of the Coalition's rules.

Apparently, because foreign governments *want* the Coalition to attend Geneva², there was no protest about this scheme to obtain the desired result. But it should be worrisome that a potential future government of Syria has such disregard for proper procedure and the rule of law.

19 Jan 2014 UN invites Iran to Geneva²

On Sunday, 19 Jan, United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, suddenly and unexpectedly invited Iran to attend Geneva². Ban said:

... I have decided to issue some additional invitations to the one-day gathering in Montreux. They are: Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Greece, the Holy See, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, and Iran. I believe the expanded international presence on that day will be an important and useful show of solidarity in advance of the hard work that the Syrian Government and opposition delegations will begin two days later in Geneva.

As I have said repeatedly, I believe strongly that Iran needs to be part of the solution to the Syrian crisis.

I have spoken at length in recent days with Iran's Foreign Minister, Mr. Javad Zarif. He has assured me that, like all the other countries invited to the opening day discussions in Montreux, Iran understands that the basis of the talks is the full implementation of

the 30 June 2012 Geneva Communique, including the Action Plan.

Foreign Minister Zarif and I agree that the goal of the negotiations is to establish, by mutual consent, a transitional governing body with full executive powers. It was on that basis that Foreign Minister Zarif pledged that Iran would play a positive and constructive role in Montreux.

Therefore, as convenor and host of the conference, I have decided to issue an invitation to Iran to participate.

....

Let me be clear — Montreux is not a venue for negotiations. The Syrian parties themselves will begin that process in Geneva on 24 January.

In Montreux, we are gathering countries and organizations to show their solidarity with this process and of course with the Syrian people, who have suffered so much.

I especially appeal to the Syrian parties themselves to keep one goal in mind: the end of the suffering of the Syrian people and the beginning of a transition to a new Syria.
Ban Ki-moon, [UN](#), 19 Jan 2014.

The reaction from the Syrian National Coalition was swift. *Al-Jazeera* reported: Shortly afterwards [i.e., after Ban's announcement], the Turkey-based National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces said it would withdraw from the conference unless Ban retracted his invitation.

The US also said the UN invitation should be withdrawn unless Iran publicly states its support for a 2012 agreement that establishes a transition government in Syria.

"If Iran does not fully and publicly accept the Geneva communique, the invitation must be rescinded," Jen Psaki, State Department spokeswoman, said in a statement.
"UN chief invites Iran to Syria peace talks," *Al-Jazeera*, 20 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported:

Syria's political opposition said on Monday [20 Jan] it will withdraw from international peace talks scheduled this week unless United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon retracts an invitation to Iran, President Bashar al-Assad's main backer.

....

Less than 48 hours since Syria's main political opposition group in exile, the National Coalition, agreed to attend the talks, dubbed "Geneva 2," it threatened to withdraw.

"The Syrian Coalition announces that they will withdraw their attendance in Geneva 2 unless Ban Ki-moon retracts Iran's invitation," it said in a Twitter post, quoting National Coalition spokesman Louay Safi.

Another senior Coalition member, Anas al-Abdah, told Al-Jazeera TV by phone that the body was "surprised" by the invitation to Iran. "It is illogical and we cannot in any way accept it."

"U.N. chief invites Iran to Geneva 2, Syria opposition threatens to withdraw," [Reuters](#), 02:04 GMT, 20 Jan 2014.

See also Somini Sengupta & Michael R. Gordon, "U.N. Invites Iran to Syria Talks, Surprising American Officials," [NY Times](#), 19 Jan 2014.

On 20 Jan, France and Saudi Arabia also publicly objected to inviting Iran to Geneva2.

My comments: I do not understand the strong feelings that the Coalition and the USA have against the participation of Iran at the one-day meeting in Montreux. Obviously, Iran, as a major source of military aid to Syria, is an indispensable party to any peace conference. Further, the one-day meeting in Montreux is only for representatives of 40 nations to each make a short statement. Syria has only two supporters in the world (Russia and Iran), the other 38 nations at Montreux either support the rebels or are neutral, so the presence of Iran does *not* unfairly bias the proceedings toward Syria. As Ban explained, the actual negotiations are only between the Coalition and the Syrian government, without the other nations present. Kerry's insistence that Iran "fully and publicly accept" the Geneva1 Communiqué is a hypertechnical detail that makes Kerry and the USA appear obstructionist. While Iran has encouraged Hezbollah to fight in Syria on the side of Assad, Russia has blocked United Nations Security Council draft resolutions that condemn Assad — and *both* Iran and Russia have given aid to Assad's government — yet Kerry hates Iran, but Kerry cooperates with Russia. In my opinion, Ban, Brahimi, and Lavrov are correct to want to invite Iran to Geneva2.

And why should Iran accept the Geneva1 Communiqué? Iran was *not* invited to Geneva1 ([NY Times](#), 27 June 2012), and neither was anyone from Syria. The whole Geneva1 Communiqué is something that foreign meddlers are attempting to impose on Syria.

I want to make it clear that I am *not* a supporter of Iran. Iranians illegally seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on 4 Nov 1979 and held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. Subsequently, Iran supported terrorists (e.g., Hezbollah in Lebanon) and threatened Israel. But, because Iran is a rogue nation is *not* a good reason to exclude Iran from international conferences, particularly on subjects like Syria, where Iran is involved. Fair play and freedom of speech also apply to our enemies.

20 Jan 2014 Ultimatum from Coalition

On Monday, 20 Jan, the Syrian National Coalition issued a specific ultimatum to the United Nations:

Syria's main Western-backed opposition group says Iran must commit publicly by 7 p.m. GMT [on 20 Jan] to withdraw its "troops and militias" from Syria and abide by a 2012 transitional roadmap, or else the U.N. should withdraw its invitation for Tehran

to take part in a peace conference.

The Syrian National Coalition says if those conditions are not met by the Monday [20 Jan] deadline, then it will not attend the so-called Geneva 2 conference that is scheduled to begin Wednesday [22 Jan].

The U.N. issued a last-minute invitation to Iran late Sunday, prompting the Coalition to threaten to sit out the peace talks and throwing the entire Geneva conference into doubt.

Bassem Mroue & Lori Hinnant, "Syrian Opposition Issues Ultimatum On Peace Talks," [Associated Press](#), 14:42 GMT, 20 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera reports:

The Syrian Coalition has written a statement as well as a list of demands, including forcing Iran to withdraw troops and militias from Syria:

"The Syrian Coalition gives a deadline till 7:00 pm GMT today [20 Jan] in order to receive a clear public commitment from Iran to pledge to:

1. Withdraw all troops and militias from Syria
2. Commitment by all the terms to the Geneva 1 communique
3. A positive commitment in Geneva 2

In case of failure to obtain the pledge, we ask the SG Ban Ki-moon to rescind / withdraw its invitation to Iran. Otherwise, the Syrian Coalition will not be able to attend the Geneva 2 conference."

[Al-Jazeera](#), 20 Jan 2014.

See also: [Reuters](#), 14:27 GMT, 20 Jan 2014.

It is not clear that Iran has accepted the Geneva1 Communiqué, because Iran says they are attending Geneva2 "without preconditions":

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham said on Monday [20 Jan] that Iran is participating in the upcoming Geneva conference without accepting any preconditions.

"We accept no precondition for participating in the Geneva II [conference] and, based on the official invitation [we received], Iran will take part in the conference without [any] preconditions," Afkham said.

[PressTV](#) in Iran, 20 Jan 2014 (bracketed words in Afkham's quotation inserted by PressTV).

The Iranian news agency FARS reported:

A deputy chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces dismissed the US demand from Tehran to recognize and act on the basis of the agreement struck by participants in the Geneva I peace conference on Syria, reiterating that it cannot be the basis for the upcoming Geneva II gathering.

The statements by General Massoud Jazayeri came in response to the US State Department Spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, who said on Monday [20 Jan] that "if Iran does

not fully and publicly accept the Geneva I communiqué, the invitation must be rescinded". Psaki's remarks came a few hours after UN Chief Ban Ki-moon sent an invitation letter to Tehran to take part in the Geneva II peace conference on Syria.

"The previous agreements which are serve the interests of the foreign powers and the region's reactionary (states) cannot be the basis of future talks; rather the decision that the Syrian people will take for the future of their country will be important," Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces for Cultural Affairs and Defense Publicity Brigadier General Massoud Jazzayeri said on Monday [20 Jan].

....

On Friday [17 Jan], [Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad] Zarif once again renewed Iran's support for a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis, but reiterated that Tehran will not accept any precondition for its participation in the upcoming Geneva II Conference on Syria. "Iran will not accept any preconditions to attend the Geneva II conference on Syria," Zarif said in a telephone conversation with Ban Ki-moon.

[Zarif] stressed that Iran will take part in the Geneva II conference if the country is invited without any precondition.

"Senior Iranian Military Official: Geneva I No Basis for Geneva II Talks," [FARS](#), 20 Jan 2014.

See also "Iran to Accept No Precondition for Attending Geneva II Talks on Syria," [FARS](#); [Reuters](#), both on 20 Jan 2014.

At 18:59 GMT on 20 Jan, Reuters reported:

The United Nations said on Monday [20 Jan] that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is reviewing his options after Tehran's disappointing response to Ban's invitation to attend Syria peace talks and the Syrian opposition's threat to pull out if Iran attends.

"The secretary-general was deeply disappointed by Iranian statements today that are not consistent with the assurances he received regarding Iranian support for the Geneva communiqué," Ban's spokesman Martin Nesirky told reporters, referring to a June 2012 plan for a political transition in Syria.

"(Ban) is currently urgently considering his options in light of the disappointing reaction of some participants," Nesirky said, adding that Ban was also disappointed that the Syrian opposition had conditioned its participation on the withdrawal of Iran's invitation.

Louis Charbonneau & Michelle Nichols, "U.N.'s Ban urgently considering options on Syria peace talks," [Reuters](#), 18:59 GMT, 20 Jan 2014.

At 21:10 GMT on 20 Jan, Reuters reports that Ban has withdrawn the invitation from Iran.

The Spokesperson for the Secretary General of the United Nations issued the following statement:

During the brutal conflict of the past three years, the Syrian people have experienced

horrendous suffering, humanitarian shortages and human rights abuses. The Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 remains the internationally agreed framework for ending the crisis. It is the basis on which the global community will gather on Wednesday [22 Jan] in Montreux, Switzerland, and the foundation for the negotiations between the Syrian parties that will begin on Friday [24 Jan] in Geneva.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, the Secretary-General has sought to do everything within his power for a political solution, which is the only path forward. He has consistently maintained that regional partners with influence on the Syrian parties should do their part in promoting implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, including the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers. Most recently, he has tried to ensure that all those who can contribute to the success of a Syrian peace process be present in Montreux to express their solidarity and support for the Syrian people.

In that spirit, in a series of meetings and telephone conversations, senior Iranian officials assured the Secretary-General that Iran understood and supported the basis and goal of the Conference, including the Geneva Communiqué. The Secretary-General is deeply disappointed by Iranian public statements today that are not at all consistent with that stated commitment. He continues to urge Iran to join the global consensus behind the Geneva Communiqué. Given that it has chosen to remain outside that basic understanding, he has decided that the one-day Montreux gathering will proceed without Iran's participation.

The Secretary-General looks forward to joining the initiating parties — the Russian Federation and the United States — as well as the other States and organizations that will attend this long-awaited and hugely important push for peace. The Syrian parties, the region and the international community have an opportunity and a responsibility to end the violence and begin a transition towards a new Syria.

"Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on developments related to Syria," [UN](#), (no time), 20 Jan 2014.

After Ban rescinded the invitation from Iran, the Syrian National Coalition confirmed they would attend Geneva2. The Coalition also promised to send its list of delegates later on 20 Jan. [Reuters](#), 22:20 GMT, 20 Jan 2014. Note that the list of delegates was due on 27 Dec 2013.

On 24 Jan, Kofi Annan — the UN Secretary General before Ban Ki-moon, and the UN envoy to Syria before Brahimi — said that Iran should be present in Montreux. Annan said: "If we are going to have peace and stability in the Middle East, it is essential that Iran plays its natural role in the region." [Reuters](#).

My comments: Despite what the United Nations says, the Geneva1 Communiqué is *not* the "internationally agreed framework" for Geneva2. Most importantly, neither Assad's government nor the people of Syria agreed to that Communiqué. Iran did not agree to that Communiqué. Russia does not agree with the U.S. interpretation of the Communiqué that Assad must have no place in the transitional government. Only *nine* nations — China,

France, Russia, U.K., U.S.A., plus Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and Turkey — attended Geneva1 ([Reuters](#), 29 June 2012.), which is *not* a proper basis for an "international" consensus to determine the future of Syria. At a minimum, Assad's government, the rebels in Syria, plus Iran and Saudi Arabia, should all have been included in Geneva1.

The situation for the United Nations is grim when a group of approximately 80 Syrian expatriates sitting in a hotel room in Istanbul can issue an ultimatum to Secretary General of the United Nations, and have the Secretary General rescind his decision. The people of Syria deserve better representation than the Syrian National Coalition can provide. But, Ban's decision to withdraw the invitation from Iran was correct, because attendance by the Coalition is essential to Geneva2, while Iran would have little affect on Geneva2.

The two reasons given — (1) because Iran refused to agree to Geneva1 and (2) to placate the Syrian National Coalition — do not justify excluding Iran, who is actively involved in the Syrian civil war. Excluding dissenters from meetings is the way that dictators and tyrants behave. Ban is no tyrant, but he was forced to act like one, to salvage Geneva2.

22 Jan 2014 Geneva2 in Montreux

Diplomats from approximately forty nations spewed platitudes in a hotel conference room in Montreux, Switzerland on 22 Jan. The United Nations in Geneva posted copies of [speeches](#) by Ban, Brahimi, Lavrov, Kerry, al-Mouallem (Syrian foreign minister), and Jarba (Syrian National Coalition president). Clicking on the links to "Morning" and "Afternoon" opens links to speeches by delegates from 31 nations and organizations.

[The Telegraph](#) in London live blogged Geneva2.

The Associated Press reports that the chief delegate from Syria ran over his time limit:

The bell ran five times during Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem's speech Wednesday at the opening session of the Syrian peace conference, signaling he had exceeded the time limit. But al-Moallem refused to stop, setting off a tense exchange with U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon that showed the tensions in trying to resolve Syria's bloody conflict.

Here's the exchange:

Ban: Can you just wrap up please.

Al-Moallem: I came here after 12 hours in the airplane. I have few more minutes to end my speech. This is Syria.

Ban: How much do you have left now?

Al-Moallem: I think 5-10 minutes.

Ban: No, no. I will give you another opportunity to speak.

Al-Moallem: No, I cannot divide my speech. I must continue ... I will do my best to be fast.

Ban: Can you just wrap up in one or two minutes?

Al-Moallem: No, I can't promise you, I must finish my speech. ... You live in New York, I live in Syria. I have the right to give the Syrian version here in this forum. After three years of suffering, this is my right.

Ban: We have to have some constructive and harmonious dialogue, please refrain from inflammatory rhetoric.

A-Moallem: It is constructive, I promise you, let me finish.

Ban: Within 2-3 minutes please. I will give you another opportunity.

Al-Moallem: You spoke for 25 minutes, at least I need to speak 30 minutes.

Few minutes later, Ban interrupts again. Al-Moallem says he has one sentence left, to which Ban asks him to keep his promise.

"Syria always keeps its promises," al-Moallem replied, triggering approving laughter from the Syrian government delegation behind him and a wry grin from Ban.

"Syria FM, UN Chief In Verbal Clash At Conference," [Associated Press](#), 16:06 GMT, 22 Jan 2014.

It seems to me that al-Moallem has a good point. In U.S. courts, each side (plaintiff and defendant) have the same time for introductory and closing arguments. If there are multiple attorneys on one side, then those attorneys need to decide how to divide the total time for that side. Applying that rule here, if the total time for speeches is, e.g., six hours, Syria and Russia should divide three hours and the many (37?) nations supporting the rebels should divide three hours. The United Nations allotted Syria only 10 minutes, not nearly adequate time to present their position and reasons.

Nonetheless, Al-Moallem rudely confronted the Secretary General of the United Nations, and for that Al-Moallem should be criticized. But one can understand Al-Moallem's frustration at being in a room full of enemies.

The Associated Press reported at the end of the day:

Peace talks to carve a path out of Syria's civil war got off to a rocky start Wednesday as a bitter clash over President Bashar Assad's future threatened to collapse the negotiations even before they had begun.

....

The U.S. and the Syrian opposition opened the conference by saying that Assad lost his

legitimacy when he crushed the once-peaceful protest movement against his regime.

"We really need to deal with reality," said U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. "There is no way — no way possible in the imagination — that the man who has led the brutal response to his own people could regain the legitimacy to govern. One man and those who have supported him can no longer hold an entire nation and a region hostage."

The Syrian response was firm and blunt.

"There will be no transfer of power and President Bashar Assad is staying," Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi told reporters after the day's speeches were done.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said terrorists and foreign meddling had ripped his country apart. He refused to give up the podium despite numerous requests from the U.N. chief.

....

Ahmad al-Jarba of the Syrian National Coalition had wavered up to the last minute on whether to attend the peace talks that have been largely opposed by rebel brigades in Syria. He said any discussion of Assad's continued hold on power would effectively end the talks.

A transitional government "is the only topic for us," he said.

But al-Moallem insisted that no one except Syrians could remove Assad. He also accused the West and neighboring countries — notably Saudi Arabia, which he did not name — of funneling money, weapons and foreign fighters to the rebellion.

....

[al-Moallem] also criticized the opposition coalition, which is based in Turkey and is largely made up of exiles with little sway on events inside Syria.

Matthew Lee & Zeina Karam, "Syrian Peace Talks Stuck Over Assad's Future," [Associated Press](#) 17:27 GMT, 22 Jan 2014.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the obvious: "After the first statements this morning, it is clear that it's a long road ahead until a political solution will be found." [Associated Press](#).

At the end of the day, Reuters reported:

Syria's government and opposition, meeting for the first time, vented their mutual hostility on Wednesday at a U.N. peace conference where world powers also offered sharply differing views on forcing out President Bashar al-Assad.

Opposition leader Ahmed Jarba accused Assad of Nazi-style war crimes and demanded the Syrian government delegation at the one-day meeting in Switzerland sign up to an

international plan for handing over power.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem insisted Assad would not bow to outside demands, graphically describing what he called atrocities of the "terrorists" — rebels supported by the Arab and Western states which were present in the room.

....

There was little sign that any party was ready to make concessions at the meeting, which ended in the late afternoon.

Western officials were taken aback by the combative tone of Moualem, who also defied United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's plea to shorten his speech in testy exchanges.

....

[Moualem from Syria] insisted Assad's future was not in question, saying: "Nobody in this world has a right to withdraw legitimacy from a president or government ... other than the Syrians themselves."

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry echoed the rebel view that there is "no way" Assad can stay under the terms of a 2012 international accord urging an interim coalition. But Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said all sides had a role and condemned "one-sided interpretations" of the 2012 pact [i.e., Geneva1].

Saudi Arabia, which backs the Sunni rebels, called for Iran and its Shi'ite Lebanese ally Hezbollah to withdraw forces from Syria. Iran, locked in a sectarian confrontation across the region, was absent, shunned by the opposition and the West for rejecting calls for a transitional government. [Iran's] president said Tehran's exclusion meant talks were unlikely to succeed.

Mariam Karouny & Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria peace conference exposes deep rifts over Assad," [Reuters](#), 17:53 GMT, 22 Jan 2014.

At 08:27 GMT, Reuters issued a terse story about the opening of the Geneva2 conference, and at 16:44 GMT Reuters issued another terse story about the concluding remarks by Ban. The times on these dispatches give an indication of the duration of the conference.

Although the conference in Montreux appears to have produced no results, the Russian news media suggested that the two sides could agree to an exchange of prisoners:

Russia, the United States and the UN are devising a plan for a prisoner swap between the two sides in war-torn Syria, Russia's foreign minister said Wednesday [22 Jan].

An exchange of prisoners should increase mutual trust between the government and the opposition, Sergei Lavrov said on the first day of a long-awaited conference on Syria's civil war.

Direct negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition are set to go ahead on January 24, Lavrov said. The peace negotiations are expected to last between seven and 10 days.

"We have launched a very complicated, difficult process," Lavrov said. "For the first time in three years of this bloody conflict ... the parties have agreed to sit down at the negotiating table despite all the accusations made against each other."

"There is certainty that despite all the emotionally charged statements from both Syrian delegations, the talks will begin."

Lavrov met with the heads of the two delegations: Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, who represents the government, and Ahmad Jarba, leader of the National Coalition, Syria's main Western-backed opposition group in exile.

"They both assured me that they would try to conduct negotiations with the aim of reaching certain agreements. I'm not going to speculate right now on how successful they will be," Lavrov said.

"Syrian Sides Are Committed to Peace Talks, Planning Prisoner Swap," [RIA-Novosti](#), 22 Jan 2014.

The Voice of Russia reported:

International mediator Lakhdar Brahimi said on Wednesday [22 Jan] that both of Syria's warring sides are prepared to discuss improving access for aid supplies, prisoner swaps and local ceasefires.

Brahimi, addressing a final news conference after an international conference in Switzerland, said: "We have had some fairly clear indications that the parties are willing to discuss issues of access to needy people, the liberation of prisoners and local ceasefires."

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told reporters that he had urged the Syrian government to release detainees as a confidence-building measure.

UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi said on Wednesday [22 Jan] that he will meet both Syrian delegations separately on Thursday [23 Jan], a day ahead of their first negotiations when he will try to bring them into the same room.

Brahimi, speaking to a news conference after all-day ministerial talks in the Swiss resort of Montreux, first said it was not clear whether he would be able to bring two sides into the same room at the United Nations in Geneva on Friday [24 Jan].

"We will try to see if we meet Friday morning separately and hopefully by Friday afternoon both sides will sit in one room," he said later.

"Geneva-2: Syrian sides say ready for local ceasefire, but no confidence in it — Brahimi", [Voice of Russia](#), 22 Jan 2014.

On 23 Jan, the president of Iran called for elections in Syria:

At another Swiss venue, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called Thursday for a new election in Syria, saying his nation would respect the results. Iran, a close ally of Assad's, was barred from participating in the Swiss-based talks to end Syria's civil war.

"The best solution is to organize a free and fair election in Syria" and once the ballots are cast "we should all accept" the outcome, Rouhani said.

Badr Jamous, secretary-general of the Syrian National Coalition, derided the speech. "Where are we going to conduct such elections? In the Syrian camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey?" he said. "Or shall we look after the Syrian refugees in the boats sinking in the Mediterranean or in Europe or under the wreckage in Syria or in the cemeteries or in his prison?"

Zeina Karam, with reporting by John Heilprin, "Peace Talks Draw Syrian Opposition, Govt Apart," [Associated Press](#), 19:50 GMT, 23 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press and Reuters were bustling with news stories from Montreux on 22 Jan, but the english-language Arab news media (e.g., *Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya*, and *Arab News*) each had only one or two news stories about the conference in Montreux. I do not know why the difference in treatment of this subject. Perhaps the Arabs are disillusioned with the inability of the United Nations to solve the problem of the Palestinians and to solve the problem of terrorists in Islamic nations.

My comments: The frequent mentions of Iran by delegates to Geneva2 show that Ban was right to invite Iran to Geneva2, because Iran is involved in the Syrian civil war. Unfortunately, as described above, the Coalition and the USA objected to inviting Iran.

The Syrian government's firm position that Assad will stay, and the Coalition's firm position that Assad must resign, dooms any discussion of a transitional government for Syria. For the discussions in Geneva to have any hope of success, the delegations should discuss something else, such as a ceasefire, prisoner exchange, or humanitarian aid corridors.

Western nations look at Arab tyrants (e.g., Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Muammar Kaddafi in Libya, Mubarak in Egypt) and declare that life would be better if these tyrants were deposed. But Western nations were wrong about Iraq, wrong about Libya, and wrong about Egypt — each of those nations descended into anarchy and lawlessness, and their economy collapsed, after the tyrant was deposed. In short, Iraq, Libya, and Egypt were better when a tyrant was in control. Similarly, removal of Assad is *not* a magic solution to the current problems in Syria. After Assad is removed, Syria too will descend into anarchy and lawlessness, as hundreds of rebel and jihadist organizations compete for territory and control.

Geneva2

On 21 Jan, Agence France-Press quoted a senior Russian foreign ministry official as saying "The first round of negotiations will last for seven to 10 days. There will then be a short

break, and then the talks will resume." [Al-Jazeera](#), [Al-Arabiya](#), [Al-Bawaba](#).

On 21 Jan, I predict that either the Syrian government delegation or the Syrian National Coalition delegation will walk out of the negotiations on Friday, 24 Jan, after they feel the other side has insulted them. The concept of these two groups, who hate each other, negotiating face-to-face for at least seven consecutive days boggles the mind.

Late on 22 Jan, Brahimi announced he was considering having discussions with just one party at the beginning, while Brahimi walks between two rooms. That neatly avoids having one or both parties feeling insulted and angrily walking out of the conference.

[Voice of Russia](#); [BBC](#); both on 22 Jan 2014. [Al-Jazeera](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); on 23 Jan 2014.

The delegations from Assad's government and the Coalition are staying in separate hotels in Geneva, the Hotel de la Paix and the Intercontinental Hotel respectively. [Associated Press](#), 23 Jan 2014. The meeting is at the United Nations' Office in Geneva, the Palais des Nations.

On 23 Jan, Reuters reported the Syrian National Coalition reiterated its position that Assad must resign:

Syria's opposition leader on Thursday [23 Jan] laid out his demands for talks on ending the country's civil war, calling for the creation of a transitional government that does not include President Bashar al-Assad.

Ahmed Jarba told reporters in Geneva, where rival sides in the Syrian conflict are due to hold several days of negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations and major world powers, that he was looking to a future without Assad.

....

Assad's officials, who left talks with a U.N. envoy on Thursday without making any statement, have insisted that the Syrian president is not going anywhere, a view endorsed by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

"Obviously he is not ready at this point in time," Kerry said in an interview with Al-Arabiya television.

The opposing views of Assad's future underlined the difficulties facing the Geneva talks, the first time the rival sides have met since the fighting began.

Jarba said the talks would be difficult, long and would look at all "core issues" as a package deal, including the creation of a transitional governing body.

"This is the basis of our negotiations and we will demand it," he said.

"Syrian opposition looks to future without Assad," [Reuters](#), 20:35 GMT, 23 Jan 2014.

Obviously, demands and intransigence are a recipe for failure of negotiations. The intransigence of Assad's government is based on the fact that he is the legitimate leader of Syria, and his military controls most of Syria.

Friday, 24 Jan 2014

On Friday, 24 Jan, *Al-Arabiya* reports:

Damascus says its delegation will walk out of peace negotiations in Geneva if "serious talks" do not start by Saturday [25 Jan], according to Syrian state TV.

"If no serious work sessions are held by [Saturday, 25 Jan], the official Syrian delegation will leave Geneva due to the other side's lack of seriousness or preparedness," state television quoted Foreign Minister Walid Muallem as saying.

Syria's warring sides sat in separate rooms at the Geneva talks on Friday [24 Jan], despite efforts by U.N. mediator Lakhdar Brahimi to bring them together.

....

One opposition delegate told Reuters that the opposition will not meet with the delegation led by Muallem until it endorses the Geneva communique of June 30, 2012 calling for a transitional governing body to be established.

"We have asked the U.N. envoy for the regime to sign on to Geneva 1 and we will not meet them until they do so," he told Reuters.

Muallem, however, reiterated on Friday [24 Jan] that his government will not accept the opposition's demand for a transitional governing body.

Opposition delegate Haitham al-Maleh told Reuters: "We have explicitly demanded a written commitment from the regime delegation to accept Geneva 1. Otherwise there will be no direct negotiations."

Sources within the two delegations told AFP the opposition had balked at sitting with the regime, insisting the government accept the need for a transition government without Assad before face-to-face talks.

....

The Syrian government has accepted to release more than 5,500 prisoners, sources told Al Arabiya News Channel on Friday [24 Jan].

On Thursday [23 Jan], United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told reporters that he had urged the Syrian government to release detainees as a confidence-building measure.

"Syrian govt threatens to walk out of Geneva talks," [Al-Arabiya](#), 12:39 GMT, 24 Jan 2014.

On the first day of negotiations between the Syrian government and the rebels, the Associated Press reported:

Syria's government handed an ultimatum to a U.N. mediator hoping to broker peace in

the country's civil war, vowing to leave if "serious talks" do not begin by Saturday [25 Jan].

The Western-backed opposition, which agreed to the talks only under intense diplomatic pressure, said it was willing to be patient — but not yet willing to sit face-to-face with the government it wants to overthrow.

Both sides appeared to be trying to shift the blame for the faltering peace conference, which aims to stem the violence that has killed more than 130,000 people, destabilized the region and turned Syria into a rallying cry for al-Qaida-inspired militants.

Syrian President Bashar Assad's delegation met for less than 90 minutes Friday [24 Jan] in Geneva with U.N. mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, where Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem told him if "serious talks don't begin Saturday [25 Jan], the official Syrian delegation will have to leave because the other party is not serious or ready," according to Syrian state television.

Direct talks planned for Friday between the Syrian government and the Syrian National Coalition were scrapped, and the opposition was to meet separately with Brahimi later.

....

Haitham al-Maleh, a senior member of the opposition, told The Associated Press there was not enough common ground for direct talks on Friday. The opposition has demanded Assad's departure, a position flatly rejected by his government.

"The transition to a free Syria is the key to fighting terror," said Oubai Shahbandar, a senior adviser to the Syrian opposition.

"We will be patient," said Louay Safi, a coalition spokesman. "The negotiations are just starting."

Zeina Karam & Lori Hinnant, "Syrian Govt Threatens To Walk Out Of Peace Talks," (removed from Associated Press website and replaced with later version of news story with different title), 09:32 EST (14:32 GMT), 24 Jan 2014. See [Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#); [TribTown](#) in Indiana; [Kennebec Journal](#) in Maine.

My reaction is surprise and dismay. This kind of ultimatum is what I would expect from the amateurs in the Coalition, not from the professionals in Assad's government. It should be obvious to Assad's government that ultimatums and threatening to walk out look bad — they are a sign of weakness and immaturity. Assad's government may be assuming that, once they are in the same room with the Coalition, the Coalition will explode and walk out of the negotiations.

Three hours later, the Associated Press reported:

Delegations from Syria's government and the Western-backed opposition hoping to overthrow it will face each other "in the same room" Saturday [25 Jan] for the first time ever, a U.N. mediator said.

The mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, met separately with the two groups for two days, trying to broker peace — or at least a measure of common ground — in a civil war that has left at least 130,000 people dead.

"We are going to meet tomorrow. I hope that it will be a good beginning, and that we will continue until the end of next week," he said.

The announcement from Brahimi came after Syria's government vowed to leave Switzerland if "serious talks" did not begin by Saturday. The opposition, which agreed to the peace talks only under intense diplomatic pressure, had been reluctant to sit face-to-face with the government it insists must yield power. Direct talks planned for Friday [24 Jan] between the Syrian government and the Syrian National Coalition had been scrapped.

Zeina Karam & Lori Hinnant, "Syrian Govt, Opposition To Meet In 'Same Room'," [Associated Press](#), 17:39 GMT, 24 Jan 2014.

See also [Al-Jazeera](#).

Reuters reported:

Syria's government and opposition have agreed to meet in the same room on Saturday [25 Jan] and accept that their talks will be based on a 2012 communique which called for a transitional governing body to be set up, mediator Lakhdar Brahimi said on Friday [24 Jan].

"Tomorrow we have agreed that we shall meet in same room," Brahimi told a news conference after he held separate meetings with government and opposition delegations in Geneva.

"The discussions I had with the two parties were encouraging," he said, adding that negotiations would be based on a June 2012 statement by world powers which called for the two sides to agree on the establishment of the transitional body.

"Syrian delegations to meet in same room on Saturday — mediator," [Reuters](#), 17:17 GMT, 24 Jan 2014.

I am surprised that Assad would agree to a transitional government. Assad does *not* need a transitional government, he already has a functioning government. Further, the Coalition and Western meddlers believe that a "transitional government" means that Assad resigns *and* Assad has no place in the future of Syria. Apparently, the Syrians and Russians believe that a "transitional government" means that Assad can remain in power. Fortunately, Brahimi managed to postpone any discussion of a transitional government, and Assad's role in the future of Syria, until after simpler issues had been negotiated and decided.

Late on 24 Jan, Reuters reported that the next two days of negotiations would focus on the city of Homs.

The Syrian government and its opponents will hold their first joint meeting on Saturday to launch peace talks aimed at resolving nearly three years of civil war, after negotiations almost collapsed before they began.

With international divisions over how to end the conflict putting an overall political solution out of reach for now, the two sides will focus on smaller steps.

They will spend the first two days discussing a plan to provide humanitarian access for the city of Homs, where rebels are surrounded in central districts by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, diplomatic sources said.

"The practical aspects have been worked on, things are ready and if the government doesn't put a block on it then it could happen quickly," one of the sources said.

Even with the talks back on track and expected to last a week, deep mutual mistrust and the absence from Geneva of powerful Islamist opposition groups and President Bashar al-Assad's ally Iran make substantial progress very difficult.

....

Brahimi had already indicated that his aim was to start by seeking practical steps, like local ceasefires, prisoner releases and access for international aid deliveries, before embarking on the tougher political negotiations.

"Syria foes to meet at peace talks after rocky start," [Reuters](#), 22:31 GMT, 24 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported that one anonymous diplomat said: "It's clear there will be hysterical episodes each day." [Reuters](#), 01:29 GMT, 25 Jan 2014.

Saturday, 25 Jan 2014

Al-Jazeera reported on the morning session on Saturday:

Syrian peace talks got off to a tentative start, with the leaders of the rival delegations failing to attend the first face-to-face meeting and those present refusing to speak to each other directly.

Delegates for the Syrian government and the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC) met face-to-face for the first time in the meeting on Saturday [25 Jan] at the UN's office in Geneva.

However, neither Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem, the head of the regime delegation, and Ahmed al-Jarba, president and the head of the Syrian National Coalition delegation, were at the session.

Nor did those in the same room talk to each other directly. Instead, the meeting was mediated by the UN-Arab League special envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, who passed messages between the two groups.

During the meeting, which lasted less than an hour, Brahimi said he was trying to find a common ground between the two sides. He made clear to both sides that the

negotiations were about implementing the terms of the Geneva communique — such as the establishment of a transitional government.

After the meeting, Anas al-Abdeh of the SNC was the only one who spoke.

"It was a u-shaped table, [and we were] sitting opposite each other. Brahimi was sitting in the middle. He was the only one who spoke. He spoke for half an hour," Abdeh said. "He spoke about the need to implement the Geneva communique and about the need to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people."

"It was hard to sit in front of regime representatives, but we are doing it for the sake of the Syrian people," he said.

On Saturday, before the talk had started, Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi insisted that Assad government did not accept the formation of a transitional body, and that the government delegation were going to the talks to discuss the terminology of the communique.

"Syria is a state with a functioning state institution," he told reporters, adding there was no need to form any governing body to replace the existing government.

Zoubi was also absent from the first meeting as was Assad's media adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban.

In the absence of Muallem and Jarba, Syria's UN envoy Bashar al-Jaafari led the government delegation, while Hadi al-Bahra led the opposition delegation.

Basma Atassi, "Syrian peace talks off to muted start," [Al-Jazeera](#), 10:29 GMT, (13:29 in Qatar), 25 Jan 2014.

See also [Al-Arabiya](#), 10:51 GMT, 25 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reported on both the morning and afternoon sessions on Saturday: The U.N. mediator trying to broker peace after three years of civil war in Syria said the agreement by the antagonists to face each other at peace talks for the first time Saturday [25 Jan] is an accomplishment to be measured in "half-steps."

Lakhdar Brahimi also said the painstakingly choreographed conference would continue Sunday, focusing on humanitarian aid — the one topic the Syrian government and the opposition could agree to discuss.

"We haven't achieved much, but we are continuing," Brahimi said after about three hours acting as a buffer between the two sides. "The situation is very difficult and very, very complicated, and we are moving not in steps, but half-steps."

Sitting face to face at a U-shaped table and separated by Brahimi, President Bashar Assad's delegation and the Syrian National Coalition avoided directly touching on the war dividing them — or discussing Assad himself.

Their movements choreographed, they entered by separate doors and said they would speak only to Brahimi, and not to each other.

"One is on the left and one on right and they face one another and they talk to each other — through me, to one another," he said. "This is what happens in civilized discussions."

....

"It was not easy for us to sit with the delegation that represents the killers in Damascus, but we did it for the sake of the Syrian people and for the sake of the Syrian children," said Anas al-Abdeh, who was among the coalition's representatives. He said everyone remained calm during the first brief meeting at which only Brahimi spoke.

Diplomats have said even getting them to the same table can be considered an accomplishment three years into the uprising.

First on the agenda was a cease-fire in the city of Homs, Syria's third-largest city. Neighborhoods in the old city have been ravaged following repeated government assaults to reclaim control from rebels. The city had a pre-war population of 1 million, but most residents have since fled.

Brahimi said there was no firm agreement — local officials also needed to be involved — but he hoped for a delivery to Homs by Monday [27 Jan].

Zeina Karam, "Syria Antagonists In 'Half-Steps' Of Peace Talks," [Associated Press](#), 18:21 GMT, 25 Jan 2014.

Reuters provided the complete quotation from Brahimi: "This is what happens in civilized discussions, you talk to the president or the speaker or the chairman." [Reuters](#), 19:58 GMT, 25 Jan 2014.

See also "Brahimi: Syrian talks haven't achieved much," [Al-Arabiya](#), 18:40 GMT, 25 Jan 2014.

Sunday, 26 Jan 2014

The Associated Press reported no results from the morning negotiating session on Sunday, 26 Jan:

Syrians on opposite sides of their country's civil war tried again Sunday to find common ground, but a morning session focusing on the release of prisoners and an aid convoy to a besieged central city failed to produce an agreement, delegates said.

The delegation for President Bashar Assad complained that the talks are avoiding the main issues and questioned their usefulness, while the opposition said the government negotiating team wanted to "lecture" instead of make decisions.

Underscoring the immense hurdles facing the peace talks now in their third day, officials said Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. mediator, would hold separate meetings with the two delegates in the afternoon to try to resolve differences.

....

The Western-backed opposition, made up largely of exiled Syrians, says Assad has lost legitimacy and can no longer lead a country after unleashing the military on largely peaceful protests nearly three years ago.

The government says the rebellion is rife with terrorists and that Assad is the only person able to end the fighting that has killed more than 130,000 people.

In the meantime, the homegrown rebellion has become a regional proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with foreign fighters flooding in on both sides.

Zeina Karam "No Agreement On Aid, Prisoners In Syrians Talks," [Associated Press](#), 14:16 GMT, 26 Jan 2014.

Later, Reuters reported:

Face-to-face talks between Syria's warring parties stalled on Sunday over easing the humanitarian crisis, opposition delegates said, deepening doubts over tougher political negotiations which are due to follow.

Government and opposition delegations discussed aid and prisoner releases during a morning session in Geneva which had aimed to build some kind of trust between the sides who are implacably at odds over the fate of President Bashar al-Assad.

However, they disputed even the basic facts, and the opposition delegate told Reuters that international mediator Lakhdar Brahimi met the two parties separately later in the day. These sessions would prepare for the more contentious political talks on Monday on the 2012 "Geneva 1" accord, the delegate, Ahmad Ramadan, told Reuters.

Geneva 1 called for the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria by mutual consent. The opposition says that means Assad must go, a demand the government has dismissed out of hand, adding to pessimism over whether the Geneva talks can make much progress on ending the civil war.

....

In Geneva opposition figures said they presented a list of 47,000 detainees whose release they are seeking, as well as 2,500 women and children whose freedom they say is a priority. However, Damascus denied having even got the list.

....

There are now hundreds of rebel groups across the country, including hardline Islamists

and al Qaeda-linked militants. Few pay heed to the opposition in exile and the powerful Islamic Front has said negotiators who return from Geneva without having assured Assad's downfall will be treated as traitors.

Mariam Karouny & Dominic Evans, "Face-to-face Syrian talks stall before political phase — opposition" [Reuters](#), 18:29 GMT, 26 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported on problems in implementing results of negotiations in Geneva:

The Syrian government offered to let women and children leave the besieged city of Homs on Sunday [26 Jan] as negotiators from the warring sides discussed humanitarian gestures on a second day of face-to-face talks in Geneva.

....

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told a news conference after Sunday's meetings that the government would let women and children leave the city centre if rebels gave them safe passage. U.N. mediator Lakhdar Brahimi said he understood that they would be free to quit Homs immediately.

....

In the city itself, however, opposition activists said rebels were demanding a complete lifting of the blockade. Some criticised negotiations in Geneva on a limited ceasefire to allow people to leave and let aid into the city. One video posted online showed demonstrators carrying Islamist flags and denouncing the Geneva talks as "treachery".

....

Brahimi said opposition delegates, who want the government to release tens of thousands of detainees, had agreed to a government request to try to provide a list of those held by armed rebel groups — though many of these groups, fighting among themselves, do not recognise the negotiators' authority.

Asked about a list of 47,000 detainees submitted by the opposition, Mekdad said the government had examined the list and found most had either never been held or were now free. He also denied rebel assertions that children were being held.

Khaled Yacoub Oweis & Stephanie Nebehay, "Syria talks bring offer of exit from siege of Homs," [Reuters](#), 19:36 GMT, 26 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera reported:

The Syrian authorities also agreed to allow humanitarian aid convoys in — as soon as Monday [27 Jan]. Faisal Maqdad, the Syrian deputy foreign minister, said after Sunday's [26 Jan] meetings that the government would let women and children leave the city centre if rebels gave them safe passage. In Homs, however, opposition activists said rebels demanded a complete end to the blockade and opposed a limited ceasefire.

....

[Brahimi] said opposition delegates, who have asked for the release of nearly 50,000 detainees, had agreed to a government request to try to provide a list of those held by armed rebel groups — though many of these groups, fighting among themselves, do not recognise the negotiators' authority.

Maqdad said the Syrian government had examined an opposition list of 47,000 people believed to have been arrested by Assad's forces and found most had either never been held or were now free. [Maqdad] also denied that any children were being held.

Brahimi hopes to begin discussion of a UN plan for a transitional government at another joint session on Monday.

There was little sign of a softening of positions on the core issue — whether or not Assad should quit now, as the opposition and their Western and Arab backers say was agreed by a UN conference at Geneva 18 months ago.

An adviser to Assad, Bouthaina Shaaban, demanded that the UN text calling for a political transition should be amended.

The government was ready to discuss the Geneva Communique, she said.

However, she said, "Geneva is not the Quran. It's not the Gospel ... Geneva was issued in June 2012. We are now January 26, 2014. The ground has changed. We change according to what this reality requires".

"Syria's warring sides reach deal on Homs," [Al-Jazeera](#), 01:16 GMT, 27 Jan 2014. (I have condensed several paragraphs into a single paragraph.)

My comments: I think a better argument for rejecting Geneva1 is that no one from Syria was a party to the agreement in the Geneva1 Communiqué. However, the Coalition has subsequently endorsed Geneva1, with the interpretation favored by the "Friends of Syria" that the transitional government does *not* include Assad.

Tomorrow (Monday, 27 Jan) we will see if all of the rebels, jihadists, and Syrian government who are involved in Homs will honor the agreement reached today (Sunday, 26 Jan) in Geneva.

I am surprised that Brahimi wants to discuss a transitional government next. The parties have *not* finished discussing ceasefires, prisoner exchanges, and humanitarian aid to all besieged cities.

For example, two Christian bishops were kidnapped in Syria in April 2013. an Italian Jesuit priest went missing in Syria in July 2013, and a dozen nuns were kidnapped by rebels/jihadists on 3 Dec 2013. It would be nice if the rebels/jihadists would release these 15 Christian prisoners. Furthermore, the three Red Cross workers who were kidnapped on 13 Oct 2013 should be released.

The transitional government issue is impossible to resolve, because Assad refuses to resign, but the Coalition demands that Assad resign. So discussing the transitional government risks ending the negotiations.

Fighting in Homs on 26 Jan 2014

On Sunday, 26 Jan, the Associated Press reported:

The limited agreement to let women and children leave a blockaded part of the old city of Homs, under negotiation for at least two days, fell far short of expectations and was called into question by multiple reports of government shelling.

....

The blockaded districts of Homs came under intense fire that activists blamed on the government, calling into question how any deals reached in remote Switzerland could be implemented or verified in a chaotic civil war with dozens of players that began as a largely peaceful uprising against Assad. More than 130,000 people have died in less than three years, and millions of Syrians have fled their homes.

....

Syrian activists, including the Observatory [i.e., the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights], said some rebel-held districts in Homs came under attack Sunday morning [26 Jan] by mortar shells fired by government forces.

[Associated Press](#), 19:41 GMT, 26 Jan 2014.

What is not said is who started the shelling, or whether the rebels/jihadists in Homs were returning fire.

None of the major Western news organizations have correspondents on the ground in Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has observers on the ground in Syria, but also has an intense anti-Assad bias. So we probably do not know the whole story.

It is bizarre that Assad would shell Homs at the same time that his diplomats in Geneva are discussing a ceasefire in Homs, and discussing humanitarian aid to Homs.

Monday, 27 Jan 2014

On Monday morning, 27 Jan, the Associated Press reported:

The first meeting meant to discuss the contentious issue of a Syrian transitional government broke up less than an hour after it began Monday [27 Jan] following a tense session that one [opposition] delegate described as "a dialogue of the deaf."

....

On Monday, the two delegations were supposed to begin discussing thorny political issues such as Assad's future.

As the meeting got under way, the government delegation put forward a paper focusing on the need to combat terrorism and halt funding and shipments of weapons to rebels fighting to topple Assad, delegates said.

Both sides said the opposition rejected the paper, and the opposition said it insisted on talking about a transitional government as scheduled.

....

Brahimi broke up the meeting and was scheduled to meet with both sides separately later Monday.

The inability of the two sides to discuss Assad's future was expected.

Zeina Karam, "Tense Session Breaks Up Over Syria Transition," [Associated Press](#), 13:41 GMT, 27 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera reports that "... Lakhdar Brahimi told a news conference on Monday [27 Jan] afternoon that little progress had been made on any front, but discussions would continue on Tuesday [28 Jan]." [Al-Jazeera](#), 16:11 GMT, 27 Jan 2014. See also [Reuters](#), 17:10 GMT, 27 Jan 2014.

The Syrian government posted a copy of its controversial position paper:

1-Full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and inadmissibility to give up any part of its territory. Commitment should be made in order to restore all its occupied territories.

2-Rejection of all forms of dictate and foreign interference in the Syrian internal affairs directly and indirectly so that the Syrians decide the future of their country through democratic means and the ballot box as the Syrians are the ones who have the sole right of choosing their political system without compromising on any subject unacceptable to the Syrian people.

3-The Syrian Arab Republic is a democratic country on the basis of political pluralism, the rule of law and the independence of judiciary and citizenship and protecting national unity and cultural diversity of the components of the Syrian society and protecting public freedom.

4-Rejection of terrorism and combating it and rejecting all forms of extremism, racism, and takfiri Wahabi thinking and asking the countries to stop providing terrorist groups, supplying them with armaments, training, financing and providing them with information or financing for those and also stopping all kinds of media hatred incitement to perpetrate terrorist acts in accordance with international resolutions relevant to combating terrorism.

5-Preserving all state institutions and the country's infrastructure and public and private properties and protecting them.

[SANA](#), Syrian news agency, 27 Jan 2014.

My comments:

1. The first paragraph apparently means that the territory of Syria will not be divided into separate nations for Alawites, Kurds, rebels, or jihadists.
2. Allowing the Syrian people to choose their leader in free and fair elections is certainly preferable to foreign meddlers imposing a transitional government on Syria.
3. The third paragraph distinguishes Assad's government from the jihadists and Al-Qaeda — both of whom want to establish a Sunni Islamic government.
4. The fourth paragraph is essential to ending the civil war: foreign meddlers (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Qatar) must end their aid to the rebels and jihadists. But shouldn't Iran and Russia also end aid to the Syrian government? The words "takfiri Wahabi thinking" is a swipe at Saudi Arabia, who opposes Iran's influence in Syria.
5. The fifth paragraph is a sad joke, since much of Syria's cities are now in ruins, and Syria's economy is devastated. So much for "preserving ... and protecting" private property.

Notice there is neither a transitional government nor mention of Assad not being part of a future Syrian government — and that angered the Coalition delegation in Geneva.

I have the impression that there is less news coverage of Geneva2 on 27 Jan than on the each of the three previous days of the Geneva2 negotiations. Perhaps the disappointing failure in Homs discouraged journalists, by indicating that we are in for *agonizingly slow* progress in Geneva, and lots of hyperbole and empty promises.

Homs on 27 Jan 2014

On Sunday, 26 Jan, the Coalition and Syrian government appeared to have agreed that women and children in Homs would be allowed to leave, and then humanitarian aid (e.g., food and medicine) would be delivered to Homs. However, on Monday, 27 Jan, nothing significant happened in Homs. The Associated Press reported:

On Sunday, after three days of talks, a tentative agreement was reached about the evacuation of women and children trapped in Homs before aid convoys go in, although as of Monday night there had been no progress on the ground.

Brahimi cited security problems for part of the delay. The opposition delegation does not control armed groups inside Syria, including al-Qaida-backed militants, who do not feel bound by agreements reached in Geneva.

Zeina Karam, "Tense Session Breaks Up Over Syria Transition," [Associated Press](#), 17:23 GMT, 27 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported:

In Homs itself, opposition activists said rebels demanded a complete end to the blockade, not just a limited ceasefire. An online video showed demonstrators with Islamist flags denouncing the Geneva talks as "treachery".

It highlighted one of the difficulties of the Geneva talks — the opposition delegation only represents some of the rebel factions on the ground. Powerful Islamist fighters allied to al Qaeda are not represented at all.

Stephanie Nebehay And Mariam Karouny, "Syria peace talks hit more trouble as rebel city 'starves'" [Reuters](#), 19:45 GMT, 27 Jan 2014.

There are 12 United Nations or Red Crescent trucks that are ready to deliver humanitarian aid to Homs, but these trucks have been allegedly blocked by the Syrian government. [Al-Bawaba](#), [Washington Post](#), [BBC](#), all on 27 Jan 2014.

In reading news reports, I am struck by the way different parties interpret the plain meaning of the agreement in Geneva. The rebels/jihadists in Homs want a different agreement from what was actually reached in Geneva. The Syrian government in Homs has different concerns than the Syrian negotiators in Geneva. The U.S. State Department blames Assad's government for all of the problems in Homs, despite the presence of belligerent rebels and jihadists in Homs.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations tersely urged Russia to use its influence with Syria to implement the agreement on Homs. [Associated Press](#), 19:19 GMT, 27 Jan; [Samantha Power](#).

Tuesday, 28 Jan 2014

The Associated Press reported:

Syrian government anger over a U.S. decision to resume aid to the opposition prompted the U.N. mediator to cut short Tuesday's [28 Jan] peace talks, but he said no one was to blame for the impasse and that the negotiations would continue.

A deal to allow humanitarian aid into Homs remained stalled, with the Syrian delegation demanding assurances the U.S. aid will not go to "armed and terrorist groups" in the besieged city.

U.N.-Arab League mediator Lakhdar Brahimi said he was relieved that the government and opposition said they will remain in the daily talks through Friday [31 Jan], as planned.

"Nobody's walking out. Nobody's running away," he told reporters. "We have not actually made a breakthrough, but we are still at it, and this is enough as far as I'm concerned."

Tuesday's talks were the fifth day of negotiations regarding the civil war, focusing on opposition calls for the formation of a transition government in Syria and help for Homs.

But there has been little progress toward resolving a key issue of whether President

Bashar Assad should step aside and transfer power to a transitional government.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, whose country has been a key Syrian ally, said Moscow wants to avoid "another obsession with regime change because of somebody's personal animosity, personal hatred to a particular individual."

"Imagine Assad disappears. Who is going to keep it together? There is no answer," Lavrov said in Brussels, where a Russia-European Union summit was being held.

....

[Brahimi] confirmed that the Syrian government delegation had talked at length about its opposition to the resumption of U.S. aid.

"We believe this is not the best present to the Geneva conference," said Faisal al-Mikdad, Syria's deputy foreign minister, calling the American decision "another manifestation of U.S. support for "terrorist groups" in Syria.

"This proves again that the United States is not interested in the success of this process, and we believe the U.S. has to desist and stop its claims that it is interested in the success of this conference," he told reporters.

American officials said Monday [27 Jan] the U.S. has restarted deliveries of nonlethal aid to the Syrian opposition, more than a month after al-Qaida-linked militants seized warehouses and prompted a sudden cutoff of Western supplies to the rebels.

The officials said the communications equipment and other items are being funneled only to non-armed opposition groups, but the move boosts Syria's beleaguered rebels, who saw their international support slide, in large part because of the extremists among their ranks.

John Heilprin & Zeina Karam, "Brahimi: Syria Peace Talks Slow But 'Still At It'," [Associated Press](#), 19:47 GMT; 28 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera reported that Brahimi was trying to limit statements to journalists, probably to avoid inflammatory propaganda that would damage the environment for negotiations.

Al Jazeera's diplomatic editor James Bays, reporting from Geneva, said that unlike on previous days, news crews had not been allowed to film delegates arriving.

He said Brahimi had also warned both sides against making "inflammatory statements" to the press.

"Syria peace talks struggle in Switzerland," [Al-Jazeera](#), 17:33 GMT, 28 Jan 2014.

My comments: The resumption of aid from the USA is mentioned [above](#). The timing of the U.S. aid to rebels was really stupid, because it interfered with delicate negotiations in Geneva, and even the U.S. officials admit the aid to rebels is unlikely to change the balance of power in Syria.

Lavrov's remark about "regime change" is a reference to George W. Bush's obsession with deposing Saddam Hussein, because of Hussein's alleged acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (which were never found).

I confess that I expected the Geneva negotiations to last one day, at most two days, before one side walked out in anger. Both sides appear aware that whoever walks out will be seen as weak, and not desiring peace. But five days of negotiations with zero tangible results is only marginally better than no negotiations.

What is becoming clear is that the Syrian National Coalition is the wrong negotiating party — the Coalition has no influence with rebels, jihadists, or Al-Qaeda who are fighting in Syria. For example, on Sunday (26 Jan) the Coalition and Syria agreed to evacuate women and children from Homs and agreed to deliver humanitarian aid to Homs, but the opposition fighters in Homs — and also the Syrian government — are balking at this agreement in Geneva.

Homs on 28 Jan 2014

One of many problems in Homs is that Syrian National Coalition (who is negotiating in Geneva) does *not* control the rebels and Al-Qaeda fighters in Homs. So the opposition in Homs is not bound by any agreement in Geneva. The Associated Press reports:

Jouejati [a member of the opposition Syrian National Coalition's negotiating team] accused the government of holding up the delivery of aid to Homs, which has been under siege for nearly two years.

One complication in doing that and evacuating the city's residents is that the opposition delegation does not control armed groups inside Syria, including al-Qaida-backed militants, who do not feel bound by agreements reached in Geneva. These groups gained control of Syria's uprising as it evolved into an insurgency.

John Heilprin & Zeina Karam, "Brahimi: Syria Peace Talks Slow But 'Still At It'," [Associated Press](#), 19:47 GMT; 28 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reports on negotiations in Syria:

A United Nations official is negotiating with rebel fighters in besieged neighborhoods of a central Syrian city to allow the evacuation of civilians, the provincial governor and an activist said Tuesday [28 Jan].

Talal Barrazi, the governor of Homs province, said in a statement that policewomen, paramedics and members of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent are ready to arrange the evacuation from the city of Homs and "we are waiting for the U.N.'s response."

The comments come two days after a tentative agreement was reached at peace talks in Geneva between the Syrian government and its opponents for the evacuation of women and children trapped in Homs before aid convoys enter. U.N.-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, who is mediating the Swiss talks, said security problems are delaying the evacuation.

The old city of Homs has been under siege for nearly two years.

"We are hopeful that the U.N. team will succeed in getting an approval from armed groups in the old city to guarantee evacuation of civilians," Barrazi said. "We are ready."

An activist in Homs who goes by the name Firas al-Homsi confirmed that talks are taking place, and said the government is "refusing to allow food" into the area.

"Nothing has changed since the Geneva talks and yesterday we were subjected to heavy shelling," al-Homsi said via Skype. He said the conditions in besieged areas are miserable, with people mostly relying on olives to survive.

Albert Aji & Bassem Mroue, "Talks Resume To Evacuate Civilians In Syrian City," [Associated Press](#), 15:17 GMT, 28 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported:

The fate of a U.N. aid convoy for thousands of Syrians besieged in the city of Homs hung in the balance on Tuesday as the Syrian government demanded assurances the supplies would not end up in the hands of "terrorists". Damascus describes all armed opponents of President Bashar al-Assad's government as terrorists.

Efforts to get food and medical aid into Homs have become a test case on whether peace talks in Switzerland can produce any practical results almost three years into the Syrian conflict.

The United Nations said it was ready to deliver relief supplies to about 2,500 people trapped inside rebel-held parts of Homs, devastated by months of shelling and fighting. But the government said it first wanted to know who would get the aid.

"We are still waiting for assurances that these convoys will not go to armed groups, to terrorist groups inside the city. We want them to go to the women and children," Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told reporters.

He said the U.N. resident coordinator in Damascus, Yacoub al Helou, was shuttling between the two sides.

"The convoy is ready and still waiting to enter, the authorisation has not yet been given. We haven't given up on that," mediator Lakhdar Brahimi told a news briefing.

A U.N. source in Homs said by telephone he did not know when the convoy would roll, adding: "I don't think it will be decided in Homs but at the Damascus level with the U.N. It could be tomorrow or the day after."

Stephanie Nebehay & Tom Miles, "Aid convoy stalled as Syrian government demands assurances," [Reuters](#), 20:08 GMT, 28 Jan 2014.

Wednesday, 29 Jan 2014

The Associated Press reported:

U.N. mediator Lakhdar Brahimi says the first phase of the Syria peace talks in Geneva will end on Friday [31 Jan], as scheduled, and that the gap between the government and the opposition remains "quite large."

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday [29 Jan], Brahimi said he does not expect any substantial achievements over the next two days.

Still, he said, the "ice is breaking slowly." He said both sides will decide on Friday when the second phase of the talks will take place.

Earlier Wednesday, both sides managed to discuss the thorniest issue: the opposition's demand for a transitional government in Syria.

But President Bashar Assad's adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban, said in an interview with The Associated Press that it would be difficult to even hold a presidential election in Syria, given the raging violence of the civil war, and she rejected a transitional governing body.

Louay Safi, a spokesman for the opposition's negotiating teams, said the issue of a transitional government was put on the table for the first time. But he added the government delegation stuck to its demand that putting an end to terrorists was still its No. 1 priority.

....

Despite the apparent small step in the peace talks, chances for a breakthrough before everyone goes home Friday appear almost nil as both sides continue to blame each other for an impasse.

Shaaban suggested the government may eventually accept a national unity government that might bring in opponents, but not a transitional body.

"There's nothing in the world called transitional government. We don't mind a large government, a national unity government," she said.

Shaaban hinted for the first time that a presidential election scheduled to be held this summer may not take place.

"If you think about it now, it's very difficult to imagine how presidential elections could be conducted in such an atmosphere," she said. "The logical thing to do is to try to stop violence and then to launch a political process. Whether it is a presidential election or parliamentary elections that need to be done in the country, you need peace and quiet to be able to achieve that," Shaaban added.

She reiterated what Assad has said: that should there be an election, he sees no reason why he should not run again.

Zeina Karam, "UN Envoy: 1st Phase Of Syria Talks To End Friday," [Associated Press](#), 17:50 GMT, 29 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported:

International mediator Lakhdar Brahimi said on Wednesday [29 Jan] that he does not expect to achieve anything substantive in the first round of Syria talks ending on Friday [31 Jan], but hoped for a more productive second round starting about a week later.

His somber assessment came as the two sides took a first tentative step forward by agreeing to use the same 2012 roadmap as the basis of discussions to end the three-year civil war, though they disagreed about how talks should proceed.

"We talked about the TGB (Transitional Governing Body), but of course it is a very, very preliminary discussion and more generally of what each side expects," Brahimi told reporters.

Asked his expectations for the first week-long round expected to end on Friday [31 Jan], he said: "To be blunt, I do not expect that we will achieve anything substantive.

"I am very happy that we are still talking, but the ice is breaking slowly. But it is breaking," he said, adding that he was not disappointed.

Opposition and government sides said they agreed to use the "Geneva communiqué", a document endorsed by world powers at a conference in June 2012, and which sets out the stages needed to end the fighting and agree on a political transition.

"We have agreed that Geneva 1 is the basis of the talks," opposition spokesman Louay al-Safi told reporters.

The Syrian government delegation, which had earlier submitted its own document that it wanted the talks to focus on, said it would use the Geneva communiqué, with reservations. Syrian state television said the government wanted to discuss the text of Geneva 1 "paragraph by paragraph".

Khaled Yacoub Oweis And Mariam Karouny, "Brahimi says no substantive progress on Syria but hopeful," [Reuters](#), 19:06 GMT, 29 Jan 2014.

To help the negotiations, Russia has agreed to squeeze Syria, and the USA has agreed to squeeze the Coalition. *The Voice of Russia* reports:

The course of the inter-Syrian dialogue in Geneva has been discussed at a meeting in Moscow between Russian Deputy Foreign Ministers Mikhail Bogdanov and Gennady Gatilov and US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, the Russian Foreign Ministry reports on its website.

....

The diplomats agreed to maintain permanent contact and assist the Syrian conflicting parties to advance their talks.

Russian and American experts agreed at a bilateral meeting in Geneva on Wednesday to step up pressure on the Syrian government and opposition delegations to the Geneva-2 peace conference on Syria, said a diplomatic source.

"We have discussed in detail the current situation at the inter-Syrian talks and agreed that we need, first, to strengthen cooperation between ourselves and step up pressure on the negotiating parties to interact more actively in searching for a compromise," the source said.

[Voice of Russia](#), 29 Jan 2014.

Homs on 29 Jan 2014

Reuters reported:

There was still no sign of a breakthrough in attempts to relieve the suffering of thousands of besieged residents of the rebel-held Old City of Homs, an issue that had been put forward to break the ice and build confidence at the start of the talks.

"We also tried to see what is happening over the humanitarian issues, in particular about Homs. Negotiations between the United Nations and the Syrian authorities are still ongoing," Brahimi said of the stalled U.N. aid convoy.

....

The opposition wants the government to allow in a U.N. aid convoy for 2,500 people under siege in the Old City of Homs, but the government has said it needs to be sure the food and medicine will not go to armed groups or terrorists.

"It is still stalled, as far as I know," said Patrick McCormick, spokesman of the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF).

A spokeswoman for the U.N. World Food Programme, which is waiting to deliver a month's rations to the Old City, devastated by shelling and fighting, also said there was no movement.

U.N. human rights chief Navi Pillay has previously said international law requires all sides to permit free passage of food and medicines, and starvation of civilians as a method of combat may amount to a war crime.

Access to Homs and other besieged areas holding an estimated 250,000 people is seen as a proving ground for the peace talks.

Khaled Yacoub Oweis And Mariam Karouny, "Brahimi says no substantive progress on Syria but hopeful," [Reuters](#), 19:06 GMT, 29 Jan 2014.

The Associated Press reported the following terse, but tantalizing, remark that rebels were not allowing civilians to leave Homs:

Talks have also stalled over Homs, which has been under siege for nearly two years. One complication in allowing in humanitarian aid and evacuating the city's residents is that the opposition delegation doesn't control armed groups inside Syria, including al-Qaida-backed militants, who don't feel bound by agreements reached in Geneva. These groups gained control of Syria's uprising as it evolved into an insurgency.

....

The Homs governor said Wednesday [29 Jan] that arrangements to evacuate civilians had been finalized. In a statement sent to The Associated Press, Talal al-Barzi said UN representatives were waiting on rebels to allow civilians to leave.

Activists in the videos also said they would not accept a deal that only allowed in a limited amount of aid, which they said would be a publicity stunt for Assad's government. They said they needed medically-measured nutrients to deal with the malnutrition that they had been suffering.

Zeina Karam, "Syria Talks in Geneva Make 'Positive' Step Forward," Associated Press, 29 Jan 2014. Removed from the Associated Press website on the night of 29 Jan, but copies available at: [RIA-Novosti](#); [DeKalb Daily Chronicle](#) at 15:34 GMT; [Deseret News](#) at 14:42 GMT.

My comments: The leaders in Homs — both the rebels and the Syrian government — appear concerned only with control, power, and authority, which are expressed by demanding guarantees and other formalities. These leaders completely lack any sense of urgency concerning suffering people. We are seeing a total failure of leadership on all sides, while people suffer.

The Syrian government and the Coalition reached an agreement in Geneva about Homs on Sunday, 26 Jan. Three days later, there is still no implementation of this agreement in Homs. The parties in Geneva appear to be ignoring the failure in Homs. Instead, the parties in Geneva are discussing larger issues (e.g., transitional government) that are far beyond their ability to solve.

Thursday, 30 Jan 2014

There was no significant progress in negotiations in Geneva on Thursday, 30 Jan. [Associated Press](#); [Reuters](#); [Al-Bawaba](#); all on 30 Jan 2014.

Reuters noticed:

The 2012 agenda [known as Geneva 1], including its call for a transitional government, was drawn up at a time when Western countries mainly believed Assad's days were numbered. But the past year has seen his position improve on the ground and diplomatically.

Khaled Yacoub Oweis And Stephanie Nebehay, "Shared moment of silence but little headway at Syria talks," [Reuters](#), 18:32 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

There is also the possibility that security officials in Western governments may believe that Assad is better able to control jihadists and Al-Qaeda in Syria than any of the moderate rebels.

The Associated Press reported on behind-the-scenes manipulation of the Geneva negotiations by the USA and Russia:

Weeklong Syrian peace talks have neither stemmed the bloodshed nor produced a deal, yet pressure is mounting on Syria's government and the opposition to keep the process going after a brief break.

There are two major reasons: the United States and Russia, which both have their own interests in pushing the negotiations, and no obvious or viable alternatives to a process that seems to be going nowhere.

Crucial for the Americans is the need to prevent President Bashar Assad from running for re-election this summer in what they assume will be a rigged vote, analysts say. That would enable Assad to claim a mandate to stay in power and the violence to continue indefinitely.

The talks have enabled the Russians, Assad's chief diplomatic backers, to show themselves as key players in Middle East diplomacy — a claim they can promote regardless of whether the process delivers an end to the civil war any time soon.

In the meantime, the war in Syria rages unabated.

Assad's forces are solidifying gains, but the battle lines are largely stalemated. The rebellion against Assad's rule has been sapped by deadly infighting among moderates, Islamic groups and al-Qaida-inspired militants competing for control of territory, weapons and influence. Much of the world appears to have lost faith in the rebels, largely because of the growing influence of Islamic extremists among their ranks.

....

The Western-backed Syrian National Coalition opposition group, whose support within Syria has diminished considerably, agreed only reluctantly to attend the peace talks after arm twisting from the Americans, but made clear that its purpose was solely to negotiate a replacement for Assad. For the Syrian government that's a non-starter.

"The opposition in exile has lost a lot of its authority on the ground. They've really staked their reputation on these talks, and they have to come away with something," said Anna Boyd, an analyst with IHS Jane's.

.... Fear of a resurging al-Qaida is a common denominator among the U.S., Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran — all proxy players in the civil war now in its third year. Zeina Karam & Lori Hinnant, "Foreign Agendas Keep Syrian Peace Talks Going," [Associated Press](#), 18:34 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

Homs on 30 Jan 2014

The Associated Press reported no aid delivery to Homs, despite the agreement in Geneva on 26 Jan:

... Brahimi also said he was "very disappointed" that the humanitarian aid effort to get food convoys into besieged parts of the central Syrian city of Homs had stalled. Negotiations are still under way about whether to allow people to evacuate the area beforehand.

Syrian authorities said they wanted guarantees that the aid would not reach "terrorists" and gunmen in the city.

....

One obstacle for the Geneva talks is that the opposition delegation does not control armed groups inside Syria, including al-Qaida-backed militants, who do not feel bound by agreements reached in the talks.

John Heilprin "Syrian Sides Observe Minute Of Silence For Dead," [Associated Press](#), 18:08 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

Reuters reported:

Diplomats said there had been no progress at the Geneva talks on humanitarian issues and that a U.N. aid convoy has been waiting fruitlessly to enter the rebel-held Old City of Homs, where the United States says civilians are starving.

If there is no breakthrough on Homs this week, it would give the opposition delegation, mostly comprised of exiles, little to show for their decision to participate. Other factions with more power on the ground in Syria are opposed to the talks.

"The U.N. convoys are ready, we are waiting for clearances so we can provide this aid in a secure manner," Jens Laerke, spokesman of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), told Reuters on Thursday [30 Jan].

Khaled Yacoub Oweis And Stephanie Nebehay, "Shared moment of silence but little headway at Syria talks," [Reuters](#), 18:32 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

Arab News posted an Agence France-Presse story:

No progress was meanwhile apparent toward fulfilling the only tangible promise of the Geneva talks so far: Brahimi's announcement Sunday [26 Jan] the regime had agreed to allow women and children safe passage from besieged rebel-held areas of Homs.

The Old City of Homs has been under siege since June 2012 after rebels there rose against the regime, with an estimated 3,000 people living with near-daily shelling and the barest of supplies.

UN bodies and the International Committee of the Red Cross have said they are on standby with aid but are waiting for approval to move in.

"Ice is breaking' in Syria talks: UN mediator" [Arab News](#) (AFP), 23:38 GMT, 30 Jan 2014.

Al-Jazeera reported:

Asked about a deal to provide humanitarian aid to Homs, Brahimi said he was "very very disappointed" by the situation. He spoke of widespread destruction of historic sites in Homs. "One is extremely sad that these problems exist." Negotiations are still ongoing with regard to aid access in Homs, Brahimi said: "Do supplies go in first and then people come out, or vice versa?"

[Al-Jazeera](#), 30 Jan 2014.

Gratuitous Suggestion

In looking at the long-running religious wars (1) between the Shiite majority in Iraq and the Sunni minority and also (2) between the Sunni majority in Syria and the Shiite minority, a solution occurs to me. Make Iraq a purely Shiite nation, and move the Iraqi Sunnis to Syria. Make Syria a purely Sunni nation, and move the Syrian Shiites to Iraq. That way Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia will all have the same religion, and Saudi Arabia can stop griping about Iran's (Shiite) influence in Syria.

Obviously, moving millions of people would be expensive, but it will be cheaper than continuing sectarian wars and terrorism that is wrecking the economy of Iraq and Syria, and pushing millions of refugees into neighboring nations. Not to mention killing huge numbers of people. The relocation might be partly funded with a tax on oil exports from Syria and Iraq.

A forced migration is a bad idea, but one might encourage a migration with financial assistance, easy exchange of citizenship, plus the prospect of less terrorism in the new home.

Friday, 31 Jan 2014

The Associated Press reported:

After more than a week of negotiations aimed at ending its civil war, Syria's government refused Friday [31 Jan] to commit to a date for the next round of peace talks and roundly dismissed the opposition's demand to transfer power away from President Bashar Assad.

The standoff over what comes after Assad — and the uncertainty over U.N. mediator Lakhdar Brahimi's proposed Feb. 10 date for a second round of peace talks — underscored the tremendous challenges in finding a way out of Syria's deadly impasse.

The two sides continue to blame each other for the violence in Syria — where a three-year civil war has killed more than 130,000 people and forced millions to flee their homes. They also remain deeply divided over how to end the war and if Syria's future government should include Assad.

A tally by activists estimated Friday that 1,900 people — including at least 430 civilians — were killed in Syria during the peace talks alone.

Brahimi said the opposition has committed to joining a second round of talks in Geneva on Feb. 10.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, however, said before the government decides when to return to Geneva to meet again with the opposition, Assad will hear a report on what took place during the past week in Switzerland. The minister also dismissed the opposition's demand for a new governing body to eventually transfer power from Assad.

Brahimi tried to put a good face Friday on the first direct meetings in three years between the warring parties, suggesting they reconvene for a fresh attempt at bridging the chasm between them.

He told reporters at the end of the eighth consecutive day of intense negotiations that although they produced no tangible results, he found 10 areas of possible "common ground."

....

The weeklong negotiations had been strained over the opposition's demand for — and the government's resistance to — a transfer of power in Syria. They also failed to achieve any concrete results, especially on possible humanitarian aid convoys to besieged parts of Homs.

Zeina Karam & John Heilprin, "Syria Puts 2nd Round Of Peace Talks On Hold," [Associated Press](#), 17:33 GMT, 31 Jan 2014.

See also [Reuters](#), 20:20 GMT; [Al-Jazeera](#), 16:21 GMT; [Al-Arabiya](#), 16:26 GMT; all on 31 Jan 2014.

Al-Bawaba reported:

[The talks in Geneva on 24-31 Jan 2014] revolved around the so-called Geneva I communique, drawn up by an international conference in 2012 in the Swiss city which did not involve both sides in the war, and where world powers called for a negotiated political transition in Syria. "Geneva I as a communique was formulated in the absence of the Syrians," [Syrian Foreign Minister] Muallem said, noting that interpretations of its content diverged.

"Syria peace talks conclude with 'no tangible' results," [Al-Bawaba](#), 18:25 GMT, 31 Jan 2014. Copy at [Voice of Russia](#), 31 Jan 2014.

This is the first time I have seen the Syrian government use the argument that Geneva1 does *not* apply to them, because they were not invited to that conference.

Brahimi gave a press conference at 12:15 GMT on 31 Jan at which he issued a [statement](#) that summarized Geneva2 and listed his ten points of common ground.

Reuters reported:

Some 2,500 Syrians trapped in the besieged Old City of Homs have become pawns in complex negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition, with aid agencies caught up in an ethical dilemma amid reports of starvation.

U.N. mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, who ran week-long talks that ended without progress on Friday [31 Jan], had hoped to broker a deal paving the way for delivering food and medical supplies to rebel-held Homs and the evacuation of women and children.

But each side made demands preventing a breakthrough and putting U.N. agencies, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in an untenable position.

....

The government delegation of President Bashar al-Assad has said that women and children may leave the Old City, but that the names of men must be given before men are allowed to exit, according to Brahimi, calling it a "precondition".

The demand has raised alarm bells at U.N. agencies and the Red Cross and Red Crescent, since activists say men evacuated under a previous deal, in the besieged town of Mouadamiya, were immediately arrested by Syrian intelligence.

"It has the potential to be a sanctioned massacre," the U.N. official said of the dilemma over Homs.

"Women would be under pressure not to leave, and if they have to give the names of their husbands or fathers left behind, it would be a death sentence."

Under international humanitarian law, all sides to a conflict must allow civilians in besieged areas to leave for safer areas, on a voluntary basis. They must also protect civilians who stay behind and ease the safe passage of aid.

The Syrian opposition says the government's offer would force women and children to become homeless in return for food.

....

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem told reporters after the talks wound up on Friday [31 Jan]: "What delayed the dispatch of those shipments is one of main leaders of the opposition in Old Homs threatening (that) if shipments of convoys enter, they will open fire. Their demand is not shipment of supplies, what they want is to leave with their weapons, with the civilians through a safe corridor to another village," Moualem added.

Stephanie Nebehay "Homs is pawn in complex Syria talks amid reports of starvation," [Reuters](#), 18:21 GMT, 31 Jan 2014.

There seems to be some inconsistency in reporting, not only in the Reuters story quoted above, but also in reports by other journalists on this topic. Assad's government seems to require names of men before the men are allowed to leave with women and children. But it is also said that women leaving must "give the names of their husbands or fathers left behind". Which is correct?

If there is controversy over evacuation of women and children from Homs, why not allow humanitarian aid to enter Homs immediately, and resolve the evacuations later? This is *not* a difficult problem to solve, *if* both the rebels and Syrian government *wanted* to solve this problem.

Saturday, 1 Feb 2014

The Associated Press reported:

The United Nations' secretary-general [Ban Ki-moon] pressed the U.S. and Russia to help ensure that peace talks aimed at stemming Syria's civil war can soon resume, while Russia's foreign minister said Saturday [1 Feb] that it was "very difficult" to push Syrian President Bashar Assad's government to make concessions.

A week of peace talks ended in Geneva on Friday with no concrete progress and no immediate commitment from Assad's envoys to return on Feb. 10 for more meetings with the Western-backed opposition as suggested by mediator Lakhdar Brahimi.

....

Ban urged the warring parties to "come back with more sense of earnestness as well as seriousness and urgency." Specifically, he called on "both sides and the government in particular to allow the unfettered access required under international humanitarian law."

An agreement to allow aid convoys into rebel-held parts of the central Syrian city of Homs has remained stalled, with the government and opposition accusing each other of holding up the aid delivery into the city, which has been under siege for nearly two years.

Albert Aji, with contributions by Gier Moulson & David Rising, "UN Chief Pushes For Quick Return To Syria Talks," [Associated Press](#), 18:31 GMT, 1 Feb 2014.

Incidentally, on Sunday, 2 Feb 2014, the failure to deliver humanitarian aid to Homs disappeared from the news, as the world forgot about Homs.

Conclusions

Here is what 34 months of military conflict in Syria have accomplished:

- At least 136,000 dead people by 31 Jan 2014, increasing at approximately 5000/month.
- Approximately 2,400,000 refugees have fled from Syria.
- More than six million refugees have been displaced inside Syria.
- Syrian economy in shambles. The Syrian gross national product (GNP) contracted by 39% during 2012-13. ([AP](#)) Many buildings are in ruins. The United Nations estimates 40% of people in Syria now need humanitarian assistance. ([BBC](#), 4 Nov 2013.)
- Exacerbated religious differences between Alawites (branch of Shiite muslims), Sunni muslims (e.g., Sunni jihadists and Al-Qaeda), and Christians in Syria. 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** — not even delivery of humanitarian aid to Homs that was agreed in Geneva on 26 Jan.

On 20 Jan 2014, the Associated Press eloquently summarized the Syrian civil war:

Both the government and the opposition have suffered enormous losses, but even now, neither side appears desperate enough to budge from its entrenched position. At this point, just getting the antagonists into the same room to start what is expected to be a long process that could drag on for years would be perceived as a success.

....

Syria's crisis began in the heyday of the Arab Spring uprisings that swept away authoritarian leaders in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. Unlike the others, Syria's leadership responded to largely peaceful protests for political reform with a withering crackdown. That slowly forced the opposition to take up arms and gave birth to a civil war that has also spawned a proxy battle between regional Shiite Muslim power Iran and Sunni heavyweight Saudi Arabia.

The cumulative effect of the war has been disastrous. Syria lies in ruins, its economy shattered, its rich social fabric shredded.

Zeina Karam & Ryan Lucas, "UN Rescinds Invitation To Iran To Attend Talks," (previously titled: "Syria Talks Set To Open Amid Low Expectations"), [Associated Press](#), 18:48 EST, 20 Jan 2014.

My conclusions are similar to those in my [second](#) essay on Syria:

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.

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), and because it has no influence with opposition fighters in Syria (e.g., the failure of rebels and jihadists in Homs to respect the 26 Jan 2014 agreement in Geneva).
3. The Geneva2 conference was proposed by Russia and the USA in a meeting on 7 May 2013, but began on 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. As discussed in my [second](#) essay on Syria, the Geneva2 primary goal 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. I suggest the goal of Geneva2 should be a ceasefire, *not* a transitional government.
5. As shown by the failure to implement the 26 Jan 2014 agreement in Homs — and by the failure to agree to any other cease fires, the failure to agree to any other delivery of humanitarian aid, or the failure to agree to any release of prisoners — *neither* Assad's government, the rebels, the jihadists, *nor* Al-Qaeda desires an end to the civil war. Despite evidence of a military stalemate in Syria, each of the parties in Syria clings to the notion that they can win a military victory, and thus they should not compromise in negotiations. The two reasons that the Syrian government and the Coalition attended negotiations in Geneva was that (1) Russia and the USA, respectively, pressured them to attend, and (2) it is good propaganda for each party to pretend it is seeking peace, while portraying the other party as either terrorists or war criminals.
6. The leaders in Syria — the rebels, the jihadists, *and* Assad's government — appear concerned only with control, power, and authority, which are expressed by demanding pre-conditions, guarantees, and other formalities. These leaders completely lack any sense of urgency concerning suffering people. We are seeing a total failure of leadership on all sides, while innocent people suffer.

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 Jan 2014, the possibility of peace in Syria looks grim for the foreseeable future.

this document is at <http://www.rbs0.com/syria5.pdf>
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