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The Washington Post

Iran committed to making a deal

[David Ignatius](#)

December 15 -- Tehran -- Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that despite hitting a “snag” in nuclear negotiations last week, Iran is committed “100 percent” to reaching a comprehensive final agreement. But he voiced tough positions on key issues and said “it’s going to be a bumpy road,” with difficult bargaining ahead.

Zarif, who is Iran's top chief negotiator, outlined his views in an hour-long interview at the foreign ministry here Sunday. He said that his country would continue the talks, despite what he called the "extremely counterproductive" U.S. Treasury Department announcement last week of [new steps to enforce existing sanctions](#).

Iranian concern was eased, Zarif said, after his contacts last week with Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the chief European Union negotiator, Lady Catherine Ashton. "What I have heard from Secretary Kerry and Lady Ashton is that they are committed to an early finalization of the Geneva process with a view to reaching a comprehensive agreement. I share that objective."

Dressed in a diplomat's blue pinstripe suit and speaking in fluent, American-educated English, Zarif presented Iran's case on nuclear and regional issues. He was frank about his disagreements with leaders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and said Iran was ready to play a more active role in ending the war in Syria and in providing greater security in the Persian Gulf.

Zarif, seen by critics as the leader of Iran's "charm offensive," has become the most visible international face of a regime seeking a deal that would end punishing economic sanctions. He helped negotiate the breakthrough interim agreement reached last month in Geneva to freeze Iran's nuclear program for six months. He said that in a follow-on comprehensive agreement, Iran would affirm its commitment to a peaceful nuclear program. But he didn't provide specific responses to administration concerns about activities the U.S. argues aren't consistent with a civilian program.

On enrichment, for example, Zarif insisted that Iran could continue its domestic program with some limits and greater transparency. "We do not see any reason now that we have put so much time and effort in it, and brought [the West] to the point of abandoning the illusion of zero enrichment in Iran, why should we accept anything less."

As for Iran's heavy-water reactor at [Arak that would produce plutonium that be reprocessed as nuclear fuel](#), Zarif explained: "We cannot roll back the clock 20 years and ask Iran to simply get rid of a project that has been the subject of a great deal of human and materiel investment. However,

there are various ways of making sure that this reactor will remain exclusively peaceful.”

Asked about a U.S. demand to close the [enrichment facility at Fordow](#), built into a mountainside, Zarif said: “If you sit in Iran, and you see people having concerns about Fordow, the only conclusion you can draw is that they want to attack you.”

Zarif said he didn’t want to negotiate in public, and he argued that acceptable compromises could be found on such issues. But President Obama, pressed by Israel, has said he would [reject an agreement that doesn’t reverse the Iranian program](#) and ensure that it will be restricted to civilian uses only.

“We do not follow a policy of ambiguity; this is not our intention. We follow a policy of clarity — that we do not seek nuclear weapons,” Zarif said. “But we’re not going to accept diktats.”

Zarif acknowledged his [recent public dispute](#) with [Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari](#), the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, about what Zarif said were Iran’s limited military capabilities. “I respect Gen. Jafari’s remarks, his views, and I expect him to have differences of views with me,” he said. He also noted that some hard-liners in Iran who oppose a deal with the West “have asked for my removal.”

But Zarif insisted that he and President Hassan Rouhani lead a consensual process in all areas of foreign policy, including regional issues such as Syria. “Iran believes there is no military solution for Syria,” Zarif said, noting that he is ready to attend a so-called [Geneva 2](#) conference to seek a political settlement, so long as there are no preconditions for the removal of President Bashar al-Assad.

“We’re living at a crossroad,” the Iranian foreign minister said. But he rejected former American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s argument that Iran must become “a nation rather than a cause.” He argued that, like America, Iran wanted to press both its values and its interests. America isn’t alone in seeing itself as an “extraordinary nation,” Zarif said: “We do, too.”

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Q&A with Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister

A condensed transcript of Post columnist David Ignatius's interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Q: David Ignatius: Let me begin by asking about the state of the negotiations. After your delegation left technical negotiations in Vienna on Friday, your colleague Abbas Aragchi said that the U.S. announcement of a move to strengthen enforcement of existing sanctions “is against the spirit” of the Geneva deal” and said that Iran was evaluating an “appropriate response.” Can you clarify that and explain what you think Iran’s position should be.

A: Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian foreign minister: We are committed to ensuring that the process that we started — and it required a lot of courage on our side to reach his agreement — will lead to a satisfactory conclusion that would address the requirements as stated in the [Geneva interim] agreement — that is, to have an enrichment program in Iran while at the same time both concerns as well as restrictions imposed by the international community will be removed. This is the objective. Since we believe our program is exclusively for peaceful purposes, we have no desire to leave any ambiguity about the exclusively peaceful nature of our program. So on our side, we believe it is very easy to reach an agreement. Of course it requires serious political will and good faith in order to reach that agreement.

Now, there are statements coming from Washington — we understand that Tehran and Washington, as well as many other members of 5 + 1 [the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China and Germany], are not monolithic societies, not even monolith polities. We have various views in Iran. Some of them have been very frankly and vehemently expressed by the opponents of the agreement, to the extent that some have asked for my removal. I believe that’s only natural in a democratic society where you have different forces, different political views and different branches of government operating to check and balance the exertion of political power. The same is true in the United States. I believe it is only natural for U.S. lawmakers to be concerned.

We all hope that both our opposition as well as your opposition in the United States has first and foremost the national interest in mind. I say it for both, not concentrating on one. But I believe that because of the politics of constituencies within the United States — the prevalence of politics of

constituencies — sometimes national interest gets confused in the process. But that is not for me to say. It is an internal matter for the U.S. and I believe the American people and government are quite capable of handling it. But, when you hear voices from inside the administration question the very *raison d'être* of the negotiations, it becomes intolerable — whether it is in the strict sense of the term a violation of the term of the Geneva plan of action or not. But if statements are made that run counter to the very aim of the negotiations, coming from within the administration, then that becomes extremely counterproductive. So we needed to bring that to the attention of our negotiating partners in very strong term terms. And we believe we did. That does not mean that negotiations are dead. That means negotiations have hit a snag: As Mark Twain rightly pointed out, the news of their demise is greatly exaggerated.

So I believe we need to have a reassessment of how we want to proceed — everybody needs to do that — go back to the negotiating table with a view to removing these obstacles and moving forward. This is our intention. We do it in good faith, we do it with the political will and determination not only to fulfill the first step but also to reach in the shortest possible time the final agreement, which we believe will be in the interests of everybody, and all efforts to undermine it should cease, because they are only counterproductive.

Have you received any clarification from the administration about the meaning and intent of Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen's statements, to which I assume you were referring when you talked about statements from the administration?

We've had telephone conversations. Let me put it this way, we've had contacts with members of the P 5+1, and been talking about this in the last few days, and I believe these discussions will continue. This is not the first time we have found it necessary to engage in conversations both public as well as private on the sidelines of 5+1, and this is certainly one of them. I've been in contact with American officials as well as other 5+1 officials, as well as [European Union chief diplomat] Cathy Ashton. And everybody is trying to seek possibilities to move forward.

Have the Americans said anything that eased your concern that Cohen's statement violated the 'spirit of Geneva'?

Well, I'll leave the private discussions to remain private. I do not want to engage in that type of public diplomacy. But what I can say is that we are engaged in discussions in order to make sure that everybody is committed to Geneva. What I have heard from Secretary Kerry and Lady Ashton is that they are committed to an early finalization of the Geneva process with a view to reaching a comprehensive agreement. I share that objective. I'm sure that we will hit other obstacles on our way. This is going to be an extremely difficult process — not because the objective is difficult to attain but because the modalities of reaching the objective are difficult — because of the lack of confidence that we certainly have in Iran, particularly the Iranian people and leadership toward the intentions of the other side, and some misgivings that they may have about our intentions. So it is going to be difficult; it's going to be a bumpy road. There are very strong forces that are working to undermine, unfortunately, this process. We need to be aware of this, and we need to work with an open mind.

I just want to clarify: You mentioned speaking to Secretary Kerry, as well as Lady Ashton, and I understood you to mean that those were recent conversations. Am I right?

Well, we've never stopped communicating, and conversations have taken place. . . .

After the Cohen announcement, it sounds like Kerry helped to clarify it, which gives you confidence.

I am not Secretary Kerry's spokesman. I can tell you that we have communicated with various . . . [Russian Foreign Minister] Sergei Lavrov was here; we had lengthy discussions.

When was that?

Wednesday [Dec. 11]. I have communicated with Lady Ashton, both before and after Wednesday. I have communicated with others, including Secretary Kerry — or they have communicated with me, maybe that is a better way of putting it.

President Obama said in his presentation a week ago to the Saban Forum in Washington that he would give a 50/50 chance of reaching an acceptable agreement, comprehensive solution. I'm curious what estimate you would make, and whether you thought that was a fair estimate, a disappointing estimate, what did you think?

Well, as I said I think it's not too difficult to reach an agreement because the objective is not something that is controversial. The road will be bumpy, depending on the political will of the sides that are engaged in this, and depending on the impact of the politics of constituencies that has been very much present during this negotiation, you may be able to reach an agreement or not. I cannot put a figure on it: I am not a gambling man, so I cannot put a figure on it. But we have started this with the intention of resolving it 100 percent. But we always have our limitations. Everybody has concerns that need to be dealt with. And we are prepared to deal with reasonable concerns.

Let me ask you about some of the specifics issues that were mentioned both by President Obama and by administration officials. The interim agreement says that under the final "comprehensive" solution, Iran has the right to a civilian nuclear program under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and it goes on to note that the comprehensive solution will include enrichment capability subject to limits and transparency. So what U.S. officials say is, okay, that's the foundation. But we think that a heavy water reactor at Arak, let alone another heavy water reactor, is not consistent with the needs of a civilian program; we think that 19,000 centrifuges are not consistent with the needs of the limited civilian program described in the Geneva agreement; we think that a fortified facility inside a mountain at Fordow is not consistent with a limited civilian program. So the question is: In reassuring the P5+1 that Iran seeks a limited civilian program, are you prepared to negotiate limits for those items that I mentioned?

A: Again, I do not believe that we need to negotiate publicly. Negotiations are best done privately. But let me make a number of observations about this. First, these discussions are premised on a number of principles, which President Obama stated in his letters both to the Supreme Leader as well as President Rouhani. Those are principles of equal footing, mutual respect and mutual interest. So we need to conduct these negotiations from these premises. That is, we need to reach understandings, no attempt to dictate. As you know, Iranians have never accepted "diktats" from outside forces. And this is not an exception. The pressures that have been placed upon it, and the willingness to live with them, is testimony to the refusal to accept pressure and intimidation. So equal footing is an important concept for us. *Tell me what "equal footing" is. What's a simple definition?*

A simple definition is that we will not seek to dictate to them what a solution should look like; and we will not accept from them what they dictate a solution should look like. We are supposed to address the concerns that Iran will not produce nuclear weapons or create the situation that creates concerns about a nuclear weapons program. There are several ways of addressing that, and we will address it.

Now, the second concept that should be kept in mind is that in any negotiations, if you want to reach an agreement, you need to look at the problem from the perspective of the other side. Not just from your perspective. And I invite everybody to look at this problem from our perspective. And then, probably we will find an easier solution. ■ prepared to look at it from your perspective, too, from the West's perspective.

Let's start with enrichment. Iran did not decide to enrich. Iran was forced to enrich, because we had a share in a consortium in France called "Eurodif," which we had paid for fully, but we were not able to get a gram of enriched uranium, even for our research reactor that was built under the "Atoms for Peace" Program of President Eisenhower. We did not decide to enrich to 20 percent. We tried for 20 years to buy 20 percent-enriched uranium for fuel for that reactor. We were intimidated, insulated, pushed back and forth to the point that we said we'll do it ourselves: We're not going to take this from anybody!

Now this doesn't mean that if they provide us with fuel now we will accept it, because first of all we have made this investment domestically, and secondly we do not have any trust and, third we do not see any reason now that we have put so much time and effort in it and brought them to the point of abandoning the illusion of zero enrichment in Iran, why should we accept anything less.

But you would accept limits on the amount to be enriched?

We would discuss with them the issue. There are several ways. The limits in themselves are not the object. The objective is to ensure that this is for peaceful purposes, and this is clearly stated. It's not to remove concerns; it's to make sure that this is for peaceful purposes. Now to ensure that this is for peaceful purposes has many ways of addressing it. We will discuss those ways and we will reach an agreement on them, because this has to be mutually agreed. We believe we can reach an agreement.

Now let's move to the second issue, Arak. We offered the option — every single program that Iran has was sought from the West first; they refused, we then relied on our own technology. We did not want to start from scratch in building all these research reactors. We wanted to use the technology. Everybody wants to use sophisticated technology. It was denied to us, in denial of the NPT, because mind you, it requires countries to provide energy for peaceful purposes. It's not just a right, it's a requirement — it's an obligation to provide. So they have been in violation of the NPT for the past at least 22 years, since 1990, almost every single Western country. Unfortunately there is no official judge of that violation because that article does not have any monitoring mechanisms. But it should, because NPT stands on three pillars, and one of them is peaceful use — along with nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament. Let's not talk about disarmament, because the record is not that impressive.

Iran was not provided with light water reactors. We had to invest with what we knew how to build. It doesn't mean that we wanted a heavy water reactor because you can extract plutonium from it. It was because that was the only technology that was available to us at the time we started this.

But now?

We cannot roll back the clock 20 years and ask Iran to simply get rid of a project that has been the subject of a great deal of human and material investment. However, there are various ways of making sure that this reactor will remain exclusively peaceful — because that is our aim. There are various ways of making sure that we can gain radio isotopes . . . we cannot even today get radio isotopes from outside, . . . so we need to produce our own isotopes.

So if there's a way to have radio isotopes but address the concerns about plutonium reprocessing. . . .

About future reactors, if they provide us with ways of dealing with our requirements, fine. Current reactor, we need to discuss various scientific ways and means of dealing with it — and we are open to dealing with it. We put it on paper, and we always keep our promises. We promised to deal with Arak, and we will deal with Arak.

Let's move to the third issue, and that is Fordow: If you sit in Iran, and you see people having concerns about Fordow, the only conclusion you can draw is that they want to attack you. Because what is the significance of

Fordow? Fordow is a facility that is under daily inspection by [International Atomic Energy Agency]. Daily! So we cannot do anything in Fordow. The only difference that Fordow has from the enrichment facility at Natanz is that Fordow cannot be hit. So if you insist that I should dismantle Fordow, or do something with Fordow, that means that somebody has an intention of a military strike. And I have to say that a military strike is a violation of the most fundamental principles of international law. I mean, that is not a basis for negotiation. I should not accept negotiations which, as their foundation, have a violation international law, let alone Iranian interest. . . . So they're asking me to consider an issue that is fundamentally unreasonable.

Again, is there a way of dealing with that concern. . . .

There are ways of dealing with it, because we do not want to even leave the impression that Iran has a weapons program; that is not in our interest. We do not follow a policy of ambiguity; this is not our intention; we follow a policy of clarity that we do not seek nuclear weapons. If you call us a religious state, then at least recognize the premise on which a religious state is founded, and the highest principle in a religious state is that when the highest jurist in the country issues a decree, that becomes untouchable. And the decree is that weapons of mass destruction are against Islamic principles and are haram (sinful and forbidden). So that leaves no ambiguity. We are prepared to translate that clarity into action — because we have no interest in leaving any ambiguity. But we're not going to accept diktats. We are going to negotiate on all issues, within the framework of the Geneva agreement, but based on equal footing, mutual respect. We are prepared to put ourselves in your shoes but we, at the same time, ask you to respect our constraints. Don't ask us to give you an economic analysis of why enrichment is feasible in Iran, because it doesn't apply. For us, the issue is not economic viability but the fact of denial — when you do not have access to something, money is no problem.

I want to move to the regional file. I'm sure as foreign minister you follow developments in Syria. There's growing interest in whether Iran is prepared to work with other nations, through the Russian-U.S.-sponsored process at Geneva, to seek a political transition in Syria. I'll give you an example: On Nov. 21, representatives of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the United States met with Baroness Valerie Amos, the U.N. undersecretary for

humanitarian affairs, to discuss possible relief efforts. So I've wondered whether Iran is prepared to join in some broader process that might allow a humanitarian aid corridor into the center of Homs or into Darayya, and what other steps might be possible.

Let me try to answer the different questions. First, on Geneva 2: We made it very clear: Iran believes there is no military solution for Syria, although that may be self-evident, I do not believe that every player in this game believes that.

Does President Assad believe that?

President Assad believes that at the end of the day you need a political solution. But I believe that those who are pushing for a U.S. military strike and were disappointed after the U.S. decided to work within the scope of international law rather than outside, I don't think they believe there is no military solution. They were egging for a military solution. But we all hope now that everybody will come to their senses and grasp the reality that there is no military solution; there needs to be a political solution. We have said that if invited we will attend Geneva 2, and we have a desire to reach that political solution.

Accepting Geneva 1 [the 2012 agreement calling for political transition] as the start of that process?

We will not accept any preconditions, not that we have any difficulty with anything, but as a matter of principle, we believe that for Iran to accept preconditions is simply not necessary because if you want Iran to play a positive role, then you will invite Iran. If you do not want Iran to play a positive role, to be there, then nobody is asking for an invitation. So I'm not asking for an invitation. I will certainly not accept any preconditions. We all know that there needs to be an agreement in Geneva and that agreement has to be a Syrian agreement. Others cannot decide for the Syrians. Others can only facilitate a Syrian solution based on the consent of the Syrian people. And I believe that at the end of the day the best way to make permanent that consent is through the ballot box, and we should not be afraid of the ballot box. I'm concerned that people who believe in democratic principles are worried about the outcome of elections and are trying to put preconditions [in place]. A serious precondition can be fair elections. But a precondition cannot be who should run and who shouldn't run in an election. If the Syrian people believe that someone should not

run, someone is not fit to govern, they will vote him out. . . . They are capable of determining their future, and I believe it's an insult to the Syrian people to try to predetermine the outcome of the election. . . . I believe Iran can play a positive role in the Syrian case, but it's for them to decide. I'm not running that show.

As far as humanitarian aid is concerned, we believe that we need to take into account the anxieties, the concerns, of all parties involved, if we want to reach human beings. If you want to make political statements, that's one thing. But if you want to help human beings on the ground in various parts of Syria, either under siege by one side or the other, we need to find mechanisms that are workable. We have discussed this with various friends; we've discussed this with Turkey, we've discussed this with [U.N. Special Representative] Lakhdar Brahimi, we've discussed this with the Syrian government.

Have you talked with the United States about this?

We have not had any discussions with the U.S. about anything other than the nuclear issue. We do participate with the U.S. in various international formats, including the one that is run by U.N. Undersecretary Amos. But that is a U.N. process; we can work there together. We have not talked with the U.S. about Syria. We have concentrated on the nuclear issues because that is the issue at hand that needs to be resolved. But we are prepared to help get humanitarian assistance to the people in need inside Syria. We have discussed the logistics with various people. We are prepared to get to action. Unfortunately, some may want a political rather than a humanitarian outcome. That's not a game I want to engage in.

Let me ask a blunt question: Some people say that it's clear that President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif have authority to negotiate the nuclear file, but that the regional file remains in the hands of others, particularly the [Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps]. How would you respond to that?

I disagree. In Iran decision making about foreign affairs is a consensus building process. On all issues, the leader is involved, the National Security Council is involved, the president is the main player, but he does it with the consent of the leader. So I cannot agree with that. The government has authority on all issues of foreign policy, but that authority, by our constitution, is framed in a manner that needs to go through certain

levels of consultation. And we go through those based on our respect for the rule of law in this country, which creates specific areas of authority. *I ask the question in part because of [Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali] Jafari's comment last week criticizing you personally and that reinforced the sense the sense that there are two views, two groups, two files.*

I usually do not try to respond to comments that are made outside the context of my speech and my comments, and I do not want to commit the same mistake of commenting about somebody else's comment without understanding the entire text. I respect Gen. Jafari's remarks, his views, and I expect him to have differences of views with me. Neither the views that I express nor the views that he expresses are official views of the government of Iran or the organizations that we represent. We make speeches and we make our views and comments known, and then there is a consensus-building process where we engage in debate, discourse — sometimes heated debates — and then we reach a consensus on which we all find ourselves committed and responsible and accountable.

I want to ask you about the turn in the road in modern history that you may be living through. One way that former Secretary of State Kissinger has described this is to say that for this "turn" to happen, Iran has to be "a nation and not a cause." It has to behave like a nation that has interests, seeks respect, wants equal footing but is not a revolutionary movement that destabilizes others. So let me put it to you bluntly: Is Iran a nation or a cause today?

Well I believe the dichotomy is erroneous, particularly coming from an American. I ask you: Is America a nation or a cause? How do you describe U.S. behavior? Is the United States simply a nation, or does it have objective, have objectives, have goals. . . .

Ideals.

Ideals. Yes. So that has to be in the right framework. I believe all nations have ideals and have interests. I do not believe there is a dichotomy between interests and ideals. I believe the US has ideals and interests. . . . In my view ideals and interests converge, not diverge. But Iran is committed to principles of international law. We do not seek to undermine any government. We do not seek to interfere in the internal affairs of any other states. The security of our neighbors is tantamount to our own security and stability. We believe that we need a stable, secure environment

in order to prosper. We do not believe that tension is in our interest. So if you consider these as definitions of a nation state, then we're all for it. But if you want to create a dichotomy between ideals and national interests, I believe you will find that a difficult proposition to sell that to the United States, before you sell it to Iran.

Well, we still think of ourselves as the extraordinary nation.

We do too!

To put it in the simplest terms, I heard last week in Abu Dhabi and Dubai the degree of anxiety about what are seen as the destabilizing actions of Iran, what is seen as a systematic program of covert action by Iran through its instruments against other governments. This makes people worried. So just as on the nuclear file you would want to reassure others about the intentions of Iran, would you accept similar reassurances, similar checks, on these regional matters?

I do not accept checks. But I wrote an oped piece in the Arabic newspaper Al-Sharq al Awsat in which I proposed the establishment of a regional security and cooperation scheme. And I believe that we should have done this a long time ago. When the U.N. Security Council resolution that ended the Iraq-Iran war was being drafted, on the request of Iran, 26 years ago, we suggested that regional security should be paramount. We believe that, had that been put in place, we would not have faced the two disasters in Iraq — the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Iraq war that began with the U.S. invasion in 2003. One disaster, the Iraq-Iran war, was enough. So we believe that confidence-building measures, dialogue and cooperation between nations of this region are not only necessary, but unavoidable. All of us need it. All of us have to come to our senses. We cannot choose our neighbors. Security can only be attained through cooperation among us. Security cannot be purchased. Security is indivisible. We cannot have security at the expense of insecurity of others.

I've had very good meetings [earlier in December] with leaders in the states of the Persian Gulf. I believe we all agree that what has been taking place in Geneva is good for our future and is not against anybody. We don't see any reason for those who have shown some anxiety. All of them who talked to me [in the Gulf] told me that they welcomed this.

At the same time, out of another mouth, they express great anxiety.

I speak with one mouth, to friend and foe. And that is that we need security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf, among countries in the region, addressing concerns and anxieties, and we are prepared as the strongest country in this region.

Last question: In the last week you must have had the sense, on occasion, hearing Secretary Cohen's remarks, hearing the intense U.S. congressional campaign for additional sanctions, that this process might be slipping away. You said to Robin Wright [in a Time magazine interview a week ago] that if any new sanctions are imposed, 'the entire deal is dead.'

That was in response to her question.

But I want to ask what you would say to people in Iran and the U.S. who would be just as happy if this process was dead.

I tell them that they have tried all the wrong ways, now give the right way a chance. They have tried sanctions. They have tried pressure. The only outcome was 19,000 centrifuges and an Iranian public that distrusts the United States because of its application of double standards and its pressure on the Iranian people. They have tried all the wrong ways. They say diplomats usually try the right way after having tested all the wrong ways. Politicians have tested all the wrong ways. It's time for them to allow the right way to proceed; at least give it a chance to survive.

This is a big piece of history that you're living through.

I think we're living at a crossroad. I hope that everybody appreciates the historical significance of the process. This can change the course of our relations with the West.

[Article 2.](#)

The Washington Post

An interview with Tunisia's Rachid Ghannouchi, three years after the revolution

Lally Weymouth

December 12 -- *The Arab Spring began in Tunisia on Dec. 17, 2010, when a fruit vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi [set himself on fire](#), sparking a revolt that spread across the Arab world. Beginning with Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, dictators fell from power, and it seemed that a democratic revolution might transform the region. Yet now, on the third anniversary of*

that catalyzing moment, the outcome seems far less promising. The Washington Post's Lally Weymouth spoke with Tunisian leader Rachid Ghannouchi on Tuesday, as his Islamic Ennahda party and the opposition struggled to agree on a new interim prime minister . Excerpts:

Can the parties in the long-running national dialogue — including yourself and the other political parties — decide on a new prime minister this week?

I believe that we will be reaching an agreement before the end of this week.

Can you and opposition leader Beji Caid Essebsi Essebssi agree on a prime minister?

Ennahda and Nida Tounes are the largest parties in the country, so definitely an agreement between these two parties would facilitate an agreement with the other parties.

Reportedly, Ennahda is seeking certain guarantees in order to leave power — it wants guarantees that its members won't be prosecuted for anything they might have done.

No, we haven't asked for what you call guarantees. These are our conditions: We will resign from government [and turn over power to a technocratic government], but the price we ask for is that the country gets a democratic constitution that enshrines and protects freedoms and rights, and secondly that they give the people an election date and an election commission. But we are not asking for any protection for ourselves because we haven't done anything wrong.

Things haven't gone well in the past two years while you've ruled this country. The economy is in terrible shape. There is a security problem — two secular politicians have been killed. Your army is now fighting the jihadis at the Algerian border. You've had serious problems ruling the country, isn't that correct?

I'm not going to say that we have achieved great successes over the last two years, but we have to remember the country is going through a transitional period after the revolution. Compare our situation to other countries in a similar situation — Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and other Arab Spring countries. Tunisia is obviously faring much better. It is the last candle still shining in the Arab Spring despite all the winds that are blowing at it.

Let us look at the economy. There are some exaggerations in what the opposition is saying. We have dedicated over a fifth of the budget to developing the areas inside the country that have suffered most in the past. One of the reasons the revolution happened is because of inequality. For the last 60 years, the areas inside the country didn't receive much development. If you look at the constitution — which is nearly ready now after two years — it enshrines all the values of the revolution, like freedom of association, freedom of expression and equality for women.

Does it really? Because you wanted to make women “complementary” to men, rather than equal — second-class citizens.

We took everything that is contentious out of the constitution.

But you took it out under pressure.

This [term] “complementary” goes both ways: Man complements woman. A woman complements man.

Who has the power if the woman wants to own land or divorce her husband?

Under Tunisian law, a woman can divorce her husband. Total equality. The constitution is nearly finished, and we worked very hard on producing a constitution that represents all Tunisians, not just a part which is the Islamists. Eighty percent of our trade is with Europe, but many countries like Italy, France and Spain are going through economic problems, and this is affecting our exports and our economy. Taking this into consideration, I don't think we have done a bad job.

Some say you have made compromises, and there are Ennahda hard-liners who are unhappy.

At least they haven't thrown me out yet. There are disagreements in the party on what decisions to make and compromises to give. In the party congress, I wasn't elected by 99 percent, like Ben Ali. Seventy percent voted for me. Maybe this 70 percent has gone down a bit because of the compromises we had to give, but I think the majority of the party still supports the choices we have made.

Why did your party do so little during the attack on the U.S. Embassy in 2012? Why did it allow the Salafist protesters to storm the embassy? It's said that the attack was permitted because your party sympathizes with the Salafists and did not want to attack them as Ben Ali used to attack protesters.

We condemned the attack on the American Embassy and consider it a big security failure on the part of the government. This incident has resulted in a complete change in our policy towards the Salafists and [the radical group] Ansar al-Sharia. Before that, we used to try to convince them to work within the law. But from this moment on, we realized these people do not accept to work within the boundaries of the law, and that is why we started cracking down on them. The government later designated them as a terrorist organization, and the security forces have been working hard against them.

When did the government classify them as terrorists? After the assassination of the opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi in July?

After the assassination of Brahmi last July. But the war against them started months before — tackling their networks.

Are there jihadi training camps in Tunisia?

No. There have been rumors about them training in Iraq, and some have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some people say that because of the lawlessness in Libya, some are training there. And maybe in Mali as well.

Is Tunisia the only place where the Arab Spring might succeed? It has failed in Egypt. In order to succeed, will whichever party is in power have to make compromises?

I believe democracy will succeed in Tunisia, but I also believe that it will succeed in the other Arab Spring countries. In our modern age — in the age of free information — I don't think there is any place for dictatorships. You can see this very clearly in Egypt after the coup.

When you saw the coup in Egypt, were you concerned that this could happen to you here in Tunisia?

Some people in the opposition hoped that what happened in Egypt would happen in Tunisia. But then when they saw the massacres on TV, the opposition started distancing themselves from the Egypt scenario. We have exported revolution — the Arab Spring — to Egypt, and we don't want to import from Egypt a coup. I hope that with the success of the transition to democracy in Tunisia that we will export to Egypt a working democratic model.

Some argue that former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi made mistakes: giving himself immunity from prosecution, refusing to compromise with secular groups.

Morsi committed mistakes, but they don't justify a military coup. And whatever mistakes were committed do not justify Western countries staying silent about the dictatorship that is being built in Egypt.

You mean the United States?

The West shouldn't say silent about the massacres, the repression and the beginnings of a dictatorship that are being built.

Morsi put himself above the law; he refused to talk to any of the secular groups.

Despite everything we say about Morsi — and he has committed mistakes — not a single massacre was committed, not a single journalist was imprisoned. The media now is being controlled by the military junta to be a mouthpiece for them.

Did you have a good relationship with President Morsi?

I know him. Yes, I respect him.

You are a senior member of the international Muslim Brotherhood?

We [Ennahda] are a Tunisian party.

Aren't you the head of the political bureau of the international Muslim Brotherhood?

No, you are talking about the International Union of Muslim Scholars. It's not political.

It is run by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi [one of the top Muslim Brotherhood ideologues].

It is not a coincidence that Tunisia was the first country of the Arab Spring. I believe that Tunisia will be successful in presenting a successful democratic model because we have a homogenous society, with a small Jewish minority. Education is widespread; we have a large middle class which supports democracy. We have a moderate Islamic party, which has been one of the champions of the idea of the compatibility between Islam and democracy.

We could have written the constitution on our own, but we didn't do this because we wanted the constitution to be written not just by Islamists but by everyone. After the elections, we chose to form a coalition government not with other Islamists but with other secular parties because we wanted to send a message that the country is for everyone.

Many believe Ennahda is not moderate — that it is a party with a serious Islamist agenda.

Many tried to scare people off Ennahda by claiming Ennahda would impose strict dress rules. But if you walk around the streets, you find women choosing whether they want to wear a scarf or not. The opposition also tried to scare the West by saying that if an Islamic party comes to power, it would cut off relations with the West. After two years, we have a much more developed relationship with Europe and the U.S.

In 2011, you predicted the end of Israel. Do you expect this to come true?

This is the first time I've heard about this.

What do you think of Israel?

There is a problem there that hasn't been solved yet. There is a problem with occupation. So far, Israel has failed to reach an agreement — with [Yasser] Arafat in the past and Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] now. We hear that even Hamas is supporting the idea of a two-state solution, but we don't see Israel going towards this solution.

So you're not trying to create an Islamic state with Islamic laws here?

Tunisia, under the existing constitution ratified in 1959, is an independent state — Islam is its religion, and Arabic is its language. This is enough for us. In a democracy, it is parliament that makes the laws. We don't want a theocracy on top of parliament. Some people tried to add sharia to the new constitution, and we have rejected these calls. People don't agree on sharia, so we should leave it out.

Why was nothing done to arrest the people who assassinated secular opposition politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi this year?

A number of the people who took part in the assassinations have been arrested by security forces. These assassinations were done by professionals, so it is difficult to arrest them. In the U.S., it's still not clear who actually killed Kennedy.

When and why did you create the party?

In 1981. Here in Tunisia. It became the main opposition party.

What happened when you founded the party?

They threw me in prison in 1981 and sentenced me to 11 years. President Habib Bourguiba thought I insulted him and his government, and [that I] encouraged people to revolt.

I spent four years in prison and was released and continued my activities, and in March 1987, I was arrested again and sentenced to life in prison. I

was nearly sentenced to death. Bourguiba wanted me to get the death sentence, but then he was overthrown. I left prison in 1988.

And then?

In 1989, general elections happened, and we participated and gained the majority. Prime Minister Ben Ali decided to falsify the results and to arrest me again. So I fled the country. I continued my campaign against the Ben Ali regime from outside until the revolution started. I was received again in Tunisia by thousands in January 2011.

Why did you decide not to become prime minister?

I prefer to leave the opportunity to the young people and my colleagues who suffered more than me. Ali Laarayedh, the prime minister, was sentenced to death two times.

Lally Weymouth is a senior associate editor of The Washington Post.

[Article 3.](#)

[The Guardian](#)

Saudi Arabia and Iran must end their proxy war in Syria

[Fawaz Gerges](#)

15 December 2013 -- After last week's [suspension of non-lethal aid](#) to the Free Syrian Army by the US and UK, western strategy towards the country lies in tatters. Washington and London were forced to act after Islamist rebels, including the al-Qaida-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, took over the headquarters and warehouses of the western-backed FSA and reportedly seized anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, some of which are said to be American-supplied.

This humiliating defeat shows the rise of the Islamist rebels, most of whom oppose political dialogue with President Bashar al-Assad's regime and call for the establishment of a Qur'anic-based state. It also demonstrates the near-collapse of the FSA, which the west had hoped would unify the rebels, lead the campaign to topple Assad, and then take on al-Qaida. Many of the armed groups, including the powerful Islamic Front, say they do not recognise the western-backed political opposition, the Syrian National Coalition, as a legitimate representative and warn it against participating in next month's proposed peace conference in Geneva.

In the past year warfare among the armed rebels has overshadowed the bigger fight against Assad, allowing his forces to gain the upper hand and make tactical gains in Homs, Damascus and even the rebel stronghold Aleppo. Emboldened, Assad and his henchmen, with the backing of Iran and Russia, have repeatedly reminded the opposition they will not go to Geneva to hand over power to a transitional government.

Last week, the [US defence secretary, Chuck Hagel, conceded that Washington's approach to Syria](#) is in disarray. Even Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, called on the rebels to "avoid discord and unite", reflecting Moscow's anxiety that the opposition's fragmentation does not bode well for the peace talks.

After almost three years of urban warfare, the uprising has mutated and produced unintended consequences. It has been hijacked by religious hardliners, criminal warlords and regional rivalries. The early hopes and dreams of millions of Syrians of an open, inclusive and pluralistic post-Assad government are now buried in the country's killing fields.

From the beginning, the odds were against the nationalist opposition. It was always overwhelmingly dependent on regional powers for military and financial support, which left it vulnerable to external manipulation.

Alongside this, the Obama administration's initial grandstanding – insisting that Assad must step down and that his days were numbered – was not matched by credible strategic planning or an accurate assessment of conditions on the ground. Britain and France repeated the US line without preparing for the fact that Syria could implode and trigger a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by the recent freezing temperatures, and a regional war.

Syria is now mainly a battlefield where Saudi Arabia and Iran are waging a proxy war, with devastating sectarian repercussions. It is doubtful the peace talks can be even convened, let alone produce results, without an implicit understanding between the two warring Gulf powers. While Saudi Arabia exercises considerable influence on Islamist rebels, Iran is crucial to Assad's survival.

Both have much to gain from preventing Syria's implosion. Under its new president, Iran may be willing to cut the umbilical cord with Assad, who has become a big liability for Tehran in the Arab world. Similarly, if Saudi Arabia can use its influence, it may avoid militant Islamist rebels haunting

Syria's neighbours for years to come. It is a tall order, but the stakes for the Syrian people and the international community are huge.

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[Article 4.](#)

NYT

Russia vs. Europe

[Bill Keller](#)

December 15, 2013 -- The world needs Nelson Mandelas. Instead, it gets Vladimir Putins. As the South African hero was being sung to his grave last week, the Russian president was bullying neighboring Ukraine into a new customs union that is starting to look a bit like Soviet Union Lite, and consolidating his control of state-run media by creating a new Kremlin news agency under a nationalistic and homophobic hard-liner.

Putin's moves were not isolated events. They fit into a pattern of behavior over the past couple of years that deliberately distances Russia from the socially and culturally liberal West: laws giving official sanction to the terrorizing of gays and lesbians, the jailing of members of a punk protest group for offenses against the Russian Orthodox Church, the demonizing of Western-backed pro-democracy organizations as "foreign agents," expansive new laws on treason, limits on foreign adoptions.

What's going on is more complicated and more dangerous than just Putin flexing his political pecs. He is trying to draw the line against Europe, to deepen division on a continent that has twice in living memory been the birthplace of world wars. It seems clearer than ever that Putin is not just tweaking the West to rouse his base or nipping domestic opposition in the bud. He is also attempting to turn back 25 years of history.

The motivation of Vladimir Putin has long been a subject of journalistic and scholarly speculation, resulting in several overlapping theories: He is the boy tormented in the rough courtyards of postwar Leningrad, who put

on a KGB uniform to get even and never took it off. He is the cynical, calculating master of realpolitik, who sees the world in conspiracies and responds in kind. He is a tortured Russian soul out of Dostoevsky, distressed by godlessness, permissiveness and moral decline. He is Soviet Man, still fighting the Cold War. He is a classic narcissist, best understood by his penchant for being photographed bare-chested on horseback. Since his current presidential term began in 2012, Putin has felt increasingly that his overtures to the West were not met with due respect, that Russia was treated as a defeated nation, not an equal on the world stage. His humiliation and resentment have soured into an ideological antipathy that is not especially Soviet but is deeply Russian. His beef with the West is no longer just about political influence and economic advantage. It is, in his view, profoundly spiritual.

“Putin wants to make Russia into the traditional values capital of the world,” said Masha Gessen, author of a stinging Putin biography, an activist for gay and lesbian rights and a writer for the Latitudes blog on this paper’s website.

What, you may wonder, does Russia’s retro puritanism have to do with the turmoil in the streets of Kiev, where Ukrainian protesters yearning for a partnership with the European Union confront a president, Viktor Yanukovich, who has seemed intent on joining Putin’s rival “Eurasian” union instead? More than you might think.

Listen to the chairman of the Russian Parliament’s International Affairs Committee, Alexei Pushkov, warning that if Ukraine joins the E.U., European advisers will infiltrate the country and introduce “a broadening of the sphere of gay culture.” Or watch Dmitry Kiselyov, the flamboyantly anti-Western TV host Putin has just installed at the head of a restructured news agency. Kiselyov recently aired excerpts from a Swedish program called “Poop and Pee,” designed to teach children about bodily functions, and declared it was an example of the kind of European depravity awaiting Ukraine if it aligns with Europe. (Kiselyov is also the guy who said that when gay people die their internal organs should be burned and buried so that they cannot be donated.)

Dmitri Trenin, a scholar in the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is convinced this is not just pandering to a devout constituency, but also something more personal. In the past two years Putin

has become more ideologically conservative, more inclined to see Europe as decadent and alien to the Orthodox Christian, Eastern Slav world to which both Russia and Ukraine belong.

“It’s tolerance that has no bounds,” Trenin told me. “It’s secularism. He sees Europe as post-Christian. It’s national sovereignty that is superseded by supranational institutions. It’s the diminished role of the church. It’s people’s rights that have outstripped people’s responsibilities to one another and to the state.”

To appreciate the magnitude of what Putin is doing, it helps to recall a bit of history.

In July 1989, the Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, made a speech in Strasbourg that many took as an important step back from the Cold War. His theme was that Russia now regarded itself as sharing a “common European home” alongside its Western rivals. Mutual respect and trade should replace confrontation and deterrence as the foundations of the relationship. Military blocs would be refashioned into political organizations. What President Reagan dubbed “the evil empire” would be the good neighbor.

“The long winter of world conflict based on the division of Europe seems to be approaching an end,” Jim Hoagland, the chief foreign correspondent of The Washington Post, wrote at the time. It was a common theme.

When the Soviet Union unraveled a few years later, the largest of the 14 republics liberated from Russian dominion was Ukraine. While savoring their independence, many Ukrainians wanted to follow Russia on the path Gorbachev had announced.

“There was this slogan, ‘To Europe with Russia,’ ” said Roman Szporluk, former director of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard. “Clearly that idea is now out, and I guess Putin must have decided to restore the empire.”

Nearly 25 years after Gorbachev’s “common European home,” Putin sounds like a common European home wrecker.

It is true that during the recent years of recession and austerity Europe has lost some of its dazzle. But it is still more alluring than Ukraine’s threadbare economy, presided over by an ineffectual and corrupt governing class. Ukrainians have never abandoned their hope to be part of the West. Protesters rallying at Independence Square in Kiev represent a generation

that has studied, worked and traveled in Poland since it joined Europe, and that does not want to retreat to some shabby recreation of the Russian empire. They are backed, too, by a significant segment of Ukrainian business, which prefers Western rule of law to the corruption and legal caprice of Russia and Ukraine.

Putin may succeed in capturing Ukraine, but he could come to regret it. While he's looking to the past, he might linger over the experience of an earlier potentate, Josef Stalin, who annexed western Ukraine from Poland. As Szporluk points out, Stalin thought he was being clever, but he ended up doubling his problems: He brought politically restive Ukrainians into the Soviet tent, and left a stronger, homogenous Poland no longer unsettled by its Ukrainian minority.

Likewise, if Putin dragoons Ukraine into his Russian-dominated alliance, he will need to pacify public opinion by showering the new member with gifts he can't afford, and ceding it influence that he would rather not share. And even then, resentments of the young Ukrainian Europhiles will fester, and feed the already ample discontent of Russia's own younger generation. As Trenin points out, "Ukraine will always be looking for the exit." Putin may learn, as Stalin did, that a captive Ukraine is more trouble than it's worth.

[Article 5.](#)

NYT

Why Inequality Matters

[Paul Krugman](#)

December 15, 2013 -- Rising inequality isn't a new concern. Oliver  movie "[Wall Street](#)," with its portrayal of a rising plutocracy insisting that greed is good, was released in 1987. But politicians, intimidated by cries of "class warfare," have shied away from making a major issue out of the ever-growing gap between the rich and the rest.

That may, however, be changing. We can argue about the significance of Bill de Blasio's victory in the New York mayoral race or of [Elizabeth Warren's endorsement](#) of Social Security expansion. And we have yet to see whether President Obama's declaration that inequality is "the [defining](#)

[challenge of our age](#)” will translate into policy changes. Still, the discussion has shifted enough to produce a backlash from pundits arguing that inequality isn’t that big a deal.

They’re wrong.

The best argument for putting inequality on the back burner is the depressed state of the economy. Isn’t it [more important](#) to restore economic growth than to worry about how the gains from growth are distributed?

Well, no. First of all, even if you look only at the direct impact of rising inequality on middle-class Americans, it is indeed a very big deal. Beyond that, inequality probably played an important role in creating our economic mess, and has played a crucial role in our failure to clean it up.

Start with the numbers. On average, Americans remain a lot poorer today than they were before the economic crisis. For the bottom 90 percent of families, this impoverishment reflects both a shrinking economic pie and a declining share of that pie. Which mattered more? The answer, amazingly, is that they’re more or less comparable — that is, inequality is rising so fast that over the past six years it has been as big a drag on ordinary American incomes as poor economic performance, even though those years include the worst economic slump since the 1930s.

And if you take a longer perspective, rising inequality becomes by far the most important single factor behind lagging middle-class incomes.

Beyond that, when you try to understand both the Great Recession and the not-so-great recovery that followed, the economic and above all political impacts of inequality loom large.

It’s now widely accepted that rising household debt helped set the stage for our economic crisis; this debt surge coincided with rising inequality, and the two are probably related (although the case isn’t ironclad). After the crisis struck, the continuing shift of income away from the middle class toward a small elite was a drag on consumer demand, so that inequality is linked to both the economic crisis and the weakness of the recovery that followed.

In my view, however, the really crucial role of inequality in economic calamity has been political.

In the years before the crisis, there was a remarkable bipartisan consensus in Washington in favor of financial deregulation — a consensus justified by neither theory nor history. When crisis struck, there was a rush to rescue

the banks. But as soon as that was done, a new consensus emerged, one that involved turning away from job creation and focusing on the alleged threat from budget deficits.

What do the pre- and postcrisis consensus have in common? Both were economically destructive: Deregulation helped make the crisis possible, and the premature turn to fiscal austerity has done more than anything else to hobble recovery. Both consensus, however, corresponded to the interests and prejudices of an economic elite whose political influence had surged along with its wealth.

This is especially clear if we try to understand why Washington, in the midst of a continuing jobs crisis, somehow became obsessed with the supposed need for cuts in Social Security and Medicare. This obsession never made economic sense: In a depressed economy with record low interest rates, the government should be spending more, not less, and an era of mass unemployment is no time to be focusing on potential fiscal problems decades in the future. Nor did the attack on these programs reflect public demands.

[Surveys of the very wealthy](#) have, however, shown that they — unlike the general public — consider budget deficits a crucial issue and favor big cuts in safety-net programs. And sure enough, those elite priorities took over our policy discourse.

Which brings me to my final point. Underlying some of the backlash against inequality talk, I believe, is the desire of some pundits to depoliticize our economic discourse, to make it technocratic and nonpartisan. But that's a pipe dream. Even on what may look like purely technocratic issues, class and inequality end up shaping — and distorting — the debate.

So the president was right. Inequality is, indeed, the defining challenge of our time. Will we do anything to meet that challenge?