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8 October, 2013

<a href="#">Article 1.</a>	SPIEGEL <b><u>Interview with Bashar Assad</u></b> Dieter Bednarz and Klaus Brinkbäumer
<a href="#">Article 2.</a>	Now Lebanon <b><u>Is Assad winning?</u></b> <a href="#">Hussain Abdul-Hussain</a>
<a href="#">Article 3.</a>	Bloomberg <b><u>Egypt's Coming Civil War</u></b> Editorial
<a href="#">Article 4.</a>	Bloomberg <b><u>Rouhani Has Revealed His True Nuclear Intentions</u></b> Jeffrey Goldberg
<a href="#">Article 5.</a>	The National Interest <b><u>An Interview with Graham Allison</u></b> Harry Kazianis
<a href="#">Article 6.</a>	NYT <b><u>The International Fallout</u></b> Editorial

[Article 1.](#)  
SPIEGEL

## **Interview with Bashar Assad**

Dieter Bednarz and Klaus Brinkbäumer

10/07/2013 -- *In a SPIEGEL interview, Syrian President Bashar Assad discusses his fight for power, his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and the special expectations he has for Germany.*

*Editor's note: The following is the version of the interview with Syrian President Bashar Assad that ran in the Monday edition of*

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. President, do you love your country?

**Assad:** That is a simple, evident question. Of course. It's human to love where you come from. But it is not just a question of the emotional relationship. It is also about what you, as a person, can do for your home, especially when you are in a position of authority. That becomes especially clear in times of crisis. Right now, at a time when I have to protect my country, I am feeling just how much I love it.

**SPIEGEL:** If you were a true patriot, you would step down and pave the way for negotiations for an interim government or a cease-fire with the armed opposition.

**Assad:** The Syrian people will determine my fate. That is not a question any other party can decide. Who are these factions? Who do they represent? The Syrian people? At least part of the Syrian people? If they do, then let's go to the ballot box.

**SPIEGEL:** Are you prepared to stand in an election?

**Assad:** My second term in office will end next August. Two months earlier we will hold a presidential election. I cannot decide now whether I am going to run. It's still early, because you have to probe the mood and will of the people. If I no longer know that I have the will of the people behind me, then I will not run.

**SPIEGEL:** So you're really considering giving up power?

**Assad:** Whether I'm open-minded or not, this is about the decision of the people, because this is their country. It's not only my country.

**SPIEGEL:** But you are the reason for the rebellion. The people want to get rid of corruption and despotism. They are calling for a real democracy and the opposition believes this will only be possible if you step down.

**Assad:** Again, when you talk about factions, whether they are opposition or supporters, you have to ask yourself the question: Whom do they represent? Themselves or the country that made them? Are they speaking for the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Saudi Arabia and Qatar? My answer here has to be frank and straight to the point. This conflict has been brought to our country from abroad. These people are located abroad, they live in five-star hotels and they say and do what those countries tell them to do. But they have no grassroots in Syria.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you dispute that there's a strong opposition against you in your country?

**Assad:** That's normal. If I don't have opposition, it means all the people support me, and that's impossible.

**SPIEGEL:** But we aren't the only ones who are disputing your legitimacy. "A leader who slaughtered his citizens and gassed children to death cannot regain the legitimacy to lead a badly fractured country," US President Obama said at the United Nations General Assembly at the end of September.

**Assad:** First of all, you're talking about the president of the United States, not the president of Syria -- so he can only talk about his country. It is not legitimate for him to judge Syria. He doesn't have the right to tell the Syrian people who their president will be. Second, what he says doesn't have anything to do with the reality. He's been talking about the same thing -- that the president has to quit -- for a year and a half now. Has anything happened? Nothing has happened.

**SPIEGEL:** From our point of view, it looks more like you are the one who is ignoring reality. If you stepped down, you would spare your people a lot of suffering.

**Assad:** The whole problem wasn't about the president. What do killing innocents, explosions and the terrorism that al-Qaida is bringing to the country have to do with me being in office?

**SPIEGEL:** It has to do with the president because your troops and intelligence services are responsible for a part of these horrors. That is your responsibility.

**Assad:** Our decision from the very beginning was to respond to the demands of the demonstrators, although they were not truly peaceful demonstrations from the start. We already lost soldiers and policemen during the first weeks. Nevertheless, a committee changed the constitution (to reflect the protesters' concerns), and later there was a referendum. But we also have to fight terrorism to defend our country. I admit that mistakes were made during the implementation of this decision.

**SPIEGEL:** The victims in the first protests in Daraa, where the insurgency began, were largely protesters who were beaten and shot. This harshness was a mistake on the part of your regime.

**Assad:** In every implementation in the world, you have mistakes. You are human.

**SPIEGEL:** So you admit that the harshness against the protesters was a mistake?

**Assad:** There were personal mistakes made by individuals. We all make mistakes. Even a president makes mistakes. But even if there were mistakes in the implementation, our decisions were still fundamentally the right ones.

**SPIEGEL:** Was the massacre at Houla only the result of the failure of individuals?

**Assad:** It was the gangs and militants who attacked the village residents, never the government or its supporters. That's exactly what happened. And if you talk about proof, no one has proof against this. Actually, what happened was that our supporters are the ones who were killed, and we can give you the names of the victims' families because they supported our course against terror.

**SPIEGEL:** We have plenty of evidence. Our reporters were in Houla, where they conducted in-depth research and spoke to survivors and relatives of the victims. UN experts have also come to the conclusion that the 108 village residents who were killed, including 49 children and 34 women, were the victims of your regime. So how can you deny any responsibility and blame the so-called terrorists?

**Assad:** With all due respect to your reports, we are the Syrians. We live here and we know the reality better than your reporters. We know what is true and we can document it.

**SPIEGEL:** The perpetrators are part of Shabiha, a militia that is close to your regime.

**Assad:** Let me be frank with you. Your question is full of misstatements. However you put it, in the end a lie is a lie. So, what you say is not correct.

**SPIEGEL:** So you deny that the Shabiha militia was involved?

**Assad:** What do you mean by "Shabiha?"

**SPIEGEL:** This militia, the "ghosts," who are close to your regime.

**Assad:** This is a Turkish name. There is nothing called "Shabiha" in Syria. In many remote areas where there is no possibility for the army and police to go and rescue the people and defend them, people have bought arms and set up their own small forces to defend themselves against attacks by

militants. Some of them have fought with the army, that's true. But they are not militias that have been created to support the president. At issue is their country, which they want to defend from al-Qaida.

**SPIEGEL:** So massacres and terror are only perpetrated by the other side? Your militias, security forces and secret services have nothing to do with this?

**Assad:** You cannot go to the extreme and make things absolute -- they did everything and we did nothing, 100 percent and zero percent. Reality isn't black and white like this. It has shades of gray. So if you want to talk about our side, if you talk about the decisions, we are defending our country. The mistakes are individual, and, as president, I wouldn't discuss individual mistakes because there are 23 million Syrians. Every country has criminals who have to be fought. They can exist anywhere, including the government or the army -- or outside the government and army. This is normal, but we don't have sufficient information about this. You're asking me to generalize, but I cannot generalize.

**SPIEGEL:** A president's legitimacy is not a question of phrases and declarations. You are measured by your deeds. Through the deployment of chemical weapons against your own people, you have definitively lost the legitimacy to hold your office.

**Assad:** We did not use chemical weapons. This is a misstatement. So is the picture you paint of me as a man who kills his own people. Who isn't against me? You've got the United States, the West, the richest countries in the Arab world and Turkey. All this and I am killing my people and they still support me! Am I a Superman? No. So how can I still stay in power after two and a half years? Because a big part of the Syrian people support me, the government and the state. Whether that figure is greater or less than 50 percent? I am not saying that it is the bigger part of our population. But a big part means that you are legitimate. That is very simple. And where is another another leader who would be similarly legitimate?

**SPIEGEL:** President Obama said after the investigation into this crime by the United Nations that there was "no doubt" that your regime used chemical weapons on Aug. 21 in an attack that killed more than 1,000 people.

**Assad:** Once again, I dare Obama to give a single piece of evidence, a single shred. The only thing he has is lies.

**SPIEGEL:** But the conclusions of the UN inspectors ...

**Assad:** What conclusions? When the inspectors came to Syria, we asked them to continue the investigation. We are hoping for an explanation of who is responsible for this act.

**SPIEGEL:** Based on the trajectory of the rockets, it is possible to calculate where they were fired from -- namely the positions of your Fourth Division.

**Assad:** That doesn't prove anything, because the terrorists could be anywhere. You can find them in Damascus now. They could even launch a missile from near my house.

**SPIEGEL:** But your opponents are not capable of firing weapons containing Sarin. That requires military equipment, training and precision.

**Assad:** Who said that they are not capable? In the 1990s, terrorists used Sarin gas in an attack in Tokyo. They call it "kitchen gas" because it can be made anywhere.

**SPIEGEL:** But you really can't compare these two Sarin attacks -- they aren't comparable. This was a military action.

**Assad:** No one can say with certainty that rockets were used -- we do not have any evidence. The only thing certain is that Sarin was released. Perhaps that happened when one of our rockets struck one of the terrorists' positions? Or perhaps they made an error while they were handling it and something happened. Because they have Sarin -- they used it earlier in Aleppo.

**'The West Is more Confident in al-Qaida than Me'**

**SPIEGEL:** In total, 14 instances in which chemical weapons were used have been detected, but never before were they used on the same massive scale as they were in August. Have you actually started your own investigation?

**Assad:** Any investigation should begin with the identifying the number of the real victims. The militants said 350 victims, the US said 1,200 victims. There is something not true on the ground. There are also inconsistencies in the pictures. One of the dead children can be seen in two locations in two photos. What I want to say with this is that you have to verify this case very precisely, but no one has done that so far. We can't do that either because it is a terrorist area.

**SPIEGEL:** So close to the capital city?

**Assad:** They are very close to Damascus and very close to our army barracks. They could kill our soldiers, and that cannot be allowed to happen.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you think you can recapture ground you have lost?

**Assad:** Our fight is not about winning or losing ground. We're not two countries in which one has occupied a part of the other, like Israel has done with our Golan Heights. It's about getting rid of the terrorists. If we liberate a piece of this ground -- and that is what is happening in many areas in Syria -- this doesn't mean that you're winning, because the terrorists will go to another area and destroy it. If the people support us, then we are gaining.

**SPIEGEL:** Western intelligence agencies have tapped phone calls from your officers in which they urge the leadership to use chemical weapons.

**Assad:** That's completely fake. I don't want to base our conversation just on such allegations.

**SPIEGEL:** Is it irritating for you that we in the West perceive the situation so differently?

**Assad:** Your region always arrives late when it comes to understanding the actual situation. When we were speaking about violent protests, you were still talking about "peaceful demonstrations." And when we started talking about extremists, you started talking about "some" militants. When you spoke of extremists, we were already talking about al-Qaida. Then they started talking about a "few" terrorists at a time when we were already talking about a majority. Now they have started talking about it being 50-50. Of course, John Kerry is still in the past -- he's talking about 20 percent.

**SPIEGEL:** Could it be that we hesitate in following your assessments of the situation because we lack confidence in you? And how would you explain this lack of confidence?

**Assad:** It seems to me the West is more confident in al-Qaida than me.

**SPIEGEL:** That's absurd.

**Assad:** No, this is freedom of expression, please. That's my opinion, I'm telling you frankly. Everything that the West has been doing for the past 10 years has supported al-Qaida. Maybe they don't have this intention, but in reality it is what happened. Because of this, we now have al-Qaida here, with fighters from 80 countries. We have to deal with tens of thousands of fighters. And with that, I am just talking about the foreigners.

**SPIEGEL:** You have lost many soldiers who are defecting to the opposition. Are you trying to tell us that they are becoming al-Qaida supporters overnight?

**Assad:** No. I didn't say everybody is now al-Qaida. I said the majority. The minority is comprised of deserters or outlaws. At the beginning of the crisis, 60,000 Syrian outlaws were walking around freely outside of prison. They alone would be enough to create an army. I can't tell you the number of people fighting against us because most of them come in illegally through the borders. They come to go to paradise in their jihad against atheists or non-Muslims. Even if you get rid of thousands of them, they will still have a constant supply coming from outside.

**SPIEGEL:** And you still think you have a chance of winning this war?

**Assad:** Even if we don't have the chance, we don't have any other choice but to fight and to defend our country.

**SPIEGEL:** Let's go back to the issue of chemical weapons. We would like to remind you that you have always denied possessing chemical weapons. But now, after the crimes against humanity on Aug. 21 and the threat of a military strike by the US, you have admitted possessing them.

**Assad:** We never said we didn't have chemical weapons. We always say "if we had, then" ...

**SPIEGEL:** Chemical weapons are no reason to laugh, but there is nothing else we can do.

**Assad:** In any case, we never lied.

**SPIEGEL:** There is evidence that German firms delivered chemicals to Syria that can also be used in the making of chemical weapons. Do you have more details about that?

**Assad:** No, I don't know. It is not my business. But in principle we do not get any help from abroad when it comes to building the weapons. We don't need it. We are experts in this area ourselves.

**SPIEGEL:** How many tons of Sarin or other chemical weapons do you currently have at your disposal?

**Assad:** That's classified information until we give it to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

**SPIEGEL:** We know that Western secret services suspect a thousand tons.

**Assad:** In the end, it's about the concept, not the tons. We have the principle that we have chemical weapons, but we think the Middle East

should be a weapons of mass destruction-free zone.

**SPIEGEL:** That, too, is a question of trust. If you admit to having 45 storage depots for such weapons, how do we know that is correct?

**Assad:** The president doesn't deal with the numbers. He deals with the policy. We're very transparent. The experts can go to every site. They are going to have all the data from our government, and then they're going to verify that data on the ground. Then they can say if we are credible or not. We don't accept or commit ourselves to any agreement partially. This is our history. We're not going to pay for the destruction of the weapons, though.

**SPIEGEL:** Is the international community supposed to believe that you don't have secret depots?

**Assad:** In international relations there's nothing called trust; there's something called mechanism. They don't have to trust me in person. What counts is that the institutions work together -- my government and the OPCW -- and if I have the trust of the Syrian people. I'm not made by the West. I am made by the Syrians.

**SPIEGEL:** You don't need the West?

**Assad:** Of course we do, but not instead of the Syrians, and not instead of our real friends like the Russians. The Russians understand the reality here much better. I'm not just praising them because we have long relations. They are more independent than Europe, which is too oriented toward US policy.

**SPIEGEL:** The Russians are only concerned with their strategic interests.

**Assad:** You can discuss this with President Vladimir Putin. But let me say this: Some Europeans have come to us through different channels to say that they are convinced about our position and analysis, but cannot voice this out loud.

**SPIEGEL:** Is that also true with regard to your portrayal of the chemical weapons attack?

**Assad:** Obama's lies couldn't even convince the American people. According to one poll, 51 percent were against a military strike against Syria. The British parliament was against it too. The French parliament had a bitter debate about it. The atmosphere in Europe was against such an attack. Why? Because the majority didn't believe the story.

**SPIEGEL:** Are any of the European contacts that you continue to maintain from Germany?

**Assad:** We have some relations with some institutions, and have recently been using channels that didn't exist before. We exchange some information, but we cannot say that we have political relations.

**SPIEGEL:** Does Germany play a special role for you?

**Assad:** When I think of Europe, I ask myself who is closer to the reality in my region? Every European position is still far from our reality. Germany and Austria have the most objective and closest position to reality. The German position is the closest.

**SPIEGEL:** Could Germany take on the role of intermediary?

**Assad:** Of course, I would like to see envoys from Germany come to Syria to see and discuss the reality. Coming here doesn't mean you support the government. But if you come here, you can do, you can talk, you can discuss, you can convince. If you think you have to isolate us, you only end up isolating yourselves. This is also about your interests: Do you really want a backyard that is filled with al-Qaida? When you support instability here? After two and a half years, you should rethink your policies.

**SPIEGEL:** Given the unrest in your country, do you even have your chemical weapons arsenal under control?

**Assad:** Of course, under full control. Because let me tell you this: the material that could be used by any regular army doesn't exist in the stores in activated form. So no one can use it before it is activated.

**SPIEGEL:** Is this also true of depots containing biological weapons, which you also possess?

**Assad:** It is classified information. We never talk about military classified information, but this should not be understood as confirmation that we possess them.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you understand the international community's fears that these weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of terrorists?

**Assad:** The situation is not as bad as it seems in the media and the West. There is no need for any undue concern.

**'We Don't Have any Other Option than To Believe in Our Victory'**

**SPIEGEL:** According to our information, the armed opposition controls at least 40 percent of the country, and some estimates put that figure as high as more than two-thirds of the country.

**Assad:** These numbers are exaggerated. Sixty percent of Syria is desert. Who's in the desert? Nobody. In the rest of the country they don't control a

single full area.

**SPIEGEL:** That's not true for the area along the Turkish border.

**Assad:** They are on the borders in the north of Aleppo with Turkey, but only on that part, not fully. They have some areas, but they are just focal points. We're not talking about a front. Sometimes they are isolated in areas where there's no army to fight them. But this isn't about percentages. The solidarity of the population is much more important to us. And this is growing because many don't want terrorists destroying the country any more.

**SPIEGEL:** The brutality of the conflict has turned a quarter of the population -- some 6 million people -- into refugees.

**Assad:** We don't have a precise number. Even 4 million could be exaggerated because many Syrians moved within Syria to another house or with relatives and didn't register themselves.

**SPIEGEL:** You sound as if you are talking about a tax increase and not a humanitarian catastrophe.

**Assad:** Actually, no. In the West, when you ask about the number, you talk about it like spreadsheets. If you have 1 million or 5 million, you're going to do the same. Whether it's 70,000 victims, 80,000, then 90,000, or 100,000, it's like an auction. It's not an auction -- it's a tragedy. Whether it's 1,000 or 10,000, it's the same.

**SPIEGEL:** The flood of refugees is happening for one reason -- you and your regime.

**Assad:** Sorry, is this a question or a statement of fact? If it's a statement, it's not correct. If it's a question, the first thing we have to ask is why people leave? You don't have one reason; you have multiple reasons. One of the reasons is that many people left their homes and houses because of the threat of the terrorists.

**SPIEGEL:** No one is fleeing your soldiers and security forces?

**Assad:** The army represents Syria, otherwise you wouldn't have the army, because it would have been divided a long time ago. It is a threat to no one. When it comes to refugees, you have to ask yourself a question about the other governments, especially the Turkish government. What is their interest in having these high numbers? You know what it is? Their interest is to use them as a humanitarian card with the UN. Some other countries used them to get money for themselves, not the refugees. So you have

corruption, interests and some people that could have fled because they are scared of the government, but we don't have anything against them. And in the last two weeks, more than 100,000 or 150,000, depending on the estimate, came back to Syria. So the tide has recently been reversed.

**SPIEGEL:** How did you convince people to return?

**Assad:** We worked hard to bring them back. We engaged with everybody to alleviate their fears. If you didn't violate the law, then we have no problem with you. If you are against the government, come be against the government in Syria. We don't have a problem. That was very successful.

**SPIEGEL:** From a military perspective, however, you haven't had any success. The capture of Aleppo that was promised has not come to pass. Maalula remains a major problem, and there's even fighting in the suburbs of Damascus. We heard the thunder of grenades on our way to your palace.

**Assad:** When you have this kind of crisis, you cannot say you are as strong as before. The damage is much too massive. To be realistic, it will take time before we get over this problem. We don't have any other option than to believe in our victory.

**SPIEGEL:** How can you be so confident of victory when you need help from Lebanon's militant group Hezbollah?

**Assad:** Lebanon is a small country with a population of 4 million. In Damascus alone we have 5 million. Syria is too big for Hezbollah even if they want to send all their troops. We fought with them on the border with Lebanon against terrorists who attacked their loyalists, and we cooperated, and that was good.

**SPIEGEL:** So you could actually do without Hezbollah's help?

**Assad:** That's not what I said. I'm talking about the perception in the West and in the media that Hezbollah is fighting because the Syrian army cannot fight. Even if you want to make it a reality, you can't, because the proportion doesn't work.

**SPIEGEL:** Hezbollah are among the few who still support you. Russian President Putin appears to be slowly losing his patience with you. And the new Iranian president, Hassan Rohani, could find rapprochement with the US to be more important than your survival.

**Assad:** Putin is more supportive than ever. This has been proven by Russia's three vetoes against sanctions in the UN Security Council.

**SPIEGEL:** But he voted in favor of a resolution to destroy your chemical weapons.

**Assad:** It's a good resolution.

**SPIEGEL:** Because it prevented a US air strike?

**Assad:** There's not a single point in that resolution that's against our interests. The Russians see very clearly what we are doing here because they suffered from terrorists in Chechnya, and they know the meaning of terrorism.

**SPIEGEL:** Does that mean you are confident Moscow will deliver the S-300 air defense system you've been waiting on for months?

**Assad:** He said very clearly on many different occasions that he would continue supporting Syria, and that he's committed to the contract -- not only on air defense, but all kinds of armaments.

**SPIEGEL:** The international community will do everything possible to prevent you from acquiring more arms.

**Assad:** On what grounds? They don't have any right. We are a state, and we have the right to defend ourselves. We don't occupy others' lands. Why doesn't the international community oppose Israel when they get all these armaments? Germany sent Israel three submarines, and they occupy our land. We don't trust the West because of its double standards.

**SPIEGEL:** Even if Putin delivers the new air defense system, aren't you afraid that Israel will bomb it to pieces?

**Assad:** You cannot be afraid. When you are in a war situation, you don't do something because you're afraid of doing it. You have to strengthen yourself and not to allow your enemy to destroy your armaments or to win.

**SPIEGEL:** And if they try?

**Assad:** When that happens we can talk about it.

**SPIEGEL:** In the past you sounded more self-confident when it came to Israel.

**Assad:** No, we have always said we need peace and stability in this region. Even if you want to retaliate, you have to ask yourself the question: What would the result be? Now that we're fighting al-Qaida, in particular, we have to be cautious that we don't start a new war.

**SPIEGEL:** At what point will you be able to claim victory over al-Qaida?

**Assad:** The victory is stability. The first phase is to get rid of the terrorists. The second one, which is more difficult and dangerous, is to get rid of their

ideology, which has infiltrated some parts in Syria. It cannot be that an eight-year-old boy tries to behead someone, which happened in the north. Or that children watch the beheading with jubilation, happy like they're watching a soccer match, for example. If we don't deal with this problem, which is more dangerous than the terrorists themselves, we're going to face a bleak future.

**SPIEGEL:** This scene wouldn't sound all that surprising if it had taken place in Somalia. But in Syria?

**Assad:** The brutality we are experiencing in Syria is incredible. People slaughtered a Christian bishop by slitting his throat with a small knife.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you still believe you can return Syria to its pre-war state?

**Assad:** In terms of stability, of course we can. If we stop billions in support for the terrorists from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the logistic support of Turkey, we could solve this problem in a few months.

**SPIEGEL:** Is it still possible to find a solution through negotiations?

**Assad:** With the militants? No. The definition of political opposition doesn't include an army. We will negotiate with whoever wants to lay down his arms and go back to normality. Since we discussed deserters before, I'd like to point out that it's going the other way too. People who used to be militants are fighting with the army now.

**SPIEGEL:** The international community blames you for the escalation of this conflict, whose end is not yet in sight. How do you live with this guilt?

**Assad:** It's not about me, but about Syria. The situation in Syria worries and saddens me; that's where my concern is. I am not concerned for myself.

**SPIEGEL:** Are your wife and three children still standing by you?

**Assad:** Of course, they never left Damascus for one moment.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you sometimes fear that something like what happened to Romanian President Ceausescu might happen to you? After a short trial, he was shot by his own soldiers.

**Assad:** If I were afraid, I would have left Syria a long time ago.

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. President, we thank you for this interview.

[Article 2.](#)

Now Lebanon

## Is Assad winning?

## [Hussain Abdul-Hussain](#)

October 7, 2013 -- Bashar al-Assad and his proponents make their defeats look like victories. Their detractors do the opposite. So while heavily bruised, Assad projects an image of a strong man beaming with confidence. His opponents come across as whiners who want the world to defeat Assad for them, while they have failed – for two years – in electing a body that would represent all of them.

And even though the Syrian opposition – inside of Syria and outside of it, military and non-military – has displayed incompetence, Assad has still suffered heavy losses. This is due to his many faux pas and the strength of Islamist terrorists, mostly non-Syrian, who have bloodied Assad and his irregular militias, including Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Perhaps it is time for Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah to rethink his Syria plan. It has been four months since the joint Assad-Hezbollah force conquered Qusayr. But for all the talk about a reversal in fortunes, Assad and Hezbollah have yet to show other significant gains. So long for the Hezbollah "elite force" that many thought would tilt the balance in Assad's favor.

Syria has proven to be bigger than what Hezbollah can chew. With numbers of fighters on either side counting close to 100,000, estimates indicate that Hezbollah can muster 20,000 fighters at most. And the crux of Hezbollah's force, mainly non-professionals, cannot be deployed for long tours. This leaves the militia thinly stretched, especially given that after "clearing," Assad and Hezbollah have to hold territory they re-conquer, which means they have to leave fighters behind and strain the numbers available for further attacks.

The inability to sweep, however, does not mean Assad is losing. Assad's force is mechanized and entrenched in heavily fortified bunkers on the hills around Damascus. The Assad-Hezbollah firepower and military gear are far more superior to those of the rebels.

So while Assad is not winning, he is not losing either. Assad has lost control over vast territory outside of the corridor that he controls between Damascus and the mountainous northeast, which increasingly looks like a hard nut to crack, and probably needs weapons that are not at the disposal of rebels.

That's all good news for Assad. But not losing his core territory is very different than ruling the whole of Syria, which the Assads controlled for decades.

Assad has been obsessed with "clearing" Damascus and its vicinity. His forces have employed sustained bombardment, while his infantry has tried to make inroads, with little success. The presence of rebels in suburbs, from where they can hit Assad's motorcade, undermines his attempt at projecting an image of normalcy that he and his wife, Asma, try hard to show on Instagram and social media websites.

Maybe it was this frustration that made Assad launch his chemical attack on Ghouta on August 21.

We now know that the attack was halted, perhaps after Assad felt a backlash. Whatever Assad's plan was, he certainly wanted to clear the rebel-controlled suburbs. He failed, and the chemical attack made America move its warships for a punitive strike, which even though was designed not to topple him, would have taken out the clear military advantage that he has over the rebels.

Russia too felt that its protégé had gone rogue, and it made way for the Americans to strike. But Secretary of State John Kerry's gaffe gave the Russians something to toy with diplomatically, and hence stop the attack. Seeing that America had stepped down, maybe for good, Russia and Iran now race to crack a deal with Washington over Syria. This race is bad news for Assad.

For Russia and Iran to take over Syria, they would need to show America some concessions. Moscow has so far forced Assad to admit that he sits on a giant chemical arsenal, to promise to dismantle it, and to accept talking to the opposition in Geneva, including armed groups.

For its part, Iran wants something different than Geneva. In return for abandoning uranium enrichment up to 20 percent, Tehran wants a free hand in Syria, meaning sponsors cut off the anti-Assad opposition, and Assad or Hezbollah be given a freehand to win the civil war. While Washington might stomach such a deal, it is unlikely that Assad can stay if the US and Iran become buddies. Syria will be ceded to Iran, but Assad will have to be disposed of. Washington and Tehran can always find another Maliki for Syria.

For Assad, the days of balancing Russia against America and Arab countries against Iran are long gone. Bruised and unable to get himself out of trouble, Assad will have to settle for whatever others decide for him. His fate is not in his hands anymore, which means he can't be winning.

*Hussain Abdul-Hussain is the Washington Bureau Chief of Kuwaiti newspaper Alrai.*

[Article 3.](#)

Bloomberg

## **Egypt's Coming Civil War**

Editorial

Oct 7, 2013 -- Three months ago, [Egypt](#)'s military seized power in a coup that it said was necessary both to prevent civil war and to restore democracy. By now it is clear that the military is failing on both counts. Today, suspected Islamists killed at least nine soldiers and police in attacks. Yesterday, security forces killed 51 pro-Muslim Brotherhood protesters at a rally in Cairo that, [according](#) to witnesses, had been entirely peaceful. Meanwhile, the country continues to live under a nightly curfew. None of this resembles what Egypt's defense minister and de facto ruler, General Abdelfatah al-Seesi, continues to say he wants for his country: reconciliation, economic growth and a quick return to rule by elected civilian governments. Indeed, civil war looks like a far more real threat today than when al-Seesi and the military deposed the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Mursi, Egypt's first elected president, on July 3. Al-Seesi has strong financial backing in the form of \$12 billion in loans from [Saudi Arabia](#) and other [Persian Gulf states](#), who support his policy of attempting to snuff out the Brotherhood in the country of its birth. This has allowed him to announce a stimulus package for the economy. And he remains popular: At a celebration yesterday to mark the country's 1973 war with [Israel](#), al-Seesi was cheered enthusiastically. Al-Seesi's problem is that he will succeed only if the economy does -- and that demands political stability, for which even the \$12 billion in aid from the Gulf can't substitute. He should remember that the Arab Spring was

triggered above all by a sense of economic injustice and failure, as was the upswell of popular anger against Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Their supporters have no incentive to let al-Seesi succeed where Mursi failed: They won't go home until their leaders are out of jail, have a stake in the political process and tell their supporters to leave the streets.

The Brotherhood learned this destabilizing tactic from the old military-backed establishment, which continued to run the country's bureaucracies and security forces after former President [Hosni Mubarak](#) was toppled in 2011. Although Mursi was a terrible president, who focused on securing power rather than fixing the economy, old-regime bureaucrats did what they could to block any progress he might have made. The economy remained stalled as a result.

Al-Seesi needs to be convinced, sooner rather than later, that the 20 percent to 30 percent of Egypt's population that supports Islamist parties and movements can't be marginalized peacefully, and that he won't succeed in crushing the Brotherhood, a cultlike movement that has survived numerous such attempts since its formation in 1928. The resulting instability will instead go on damping investment and growth.

Persuading the general to change course won't be easy. The influence of the U.S. and European Union has proved to be extremely limited in Egypt, so most of the burden will have to fall on Egypt's secular leaders and politicians, who for now continue to support him and his zero-sum crackdown on the Brotherhood.

General al-Seesi is right that avoiding civil conflict trumps all other concerns in Egypt. The question, for his supporters as well as opponents, is why he is promoting one.

[Article 4.](#)

Bloomberg

## **Rouhani Has Revealed His True Nuclear Intentions**

Jeffrey Goldberg

Oct 7, 2013 -- Here is something to remember as nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran appear set to recommence: The Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, the putative moderate on whose shoulders great American hopes have been placed, is proud of the work he did to advance his country's nuclear program -- and also of his efforts to stymie Western attempts to stop that work.

Rouhani didn't talk about this during his recent visit to the United Nations. He came bearing a different message: Iran seeks a peaceful resolution to its decade-old nuclear standoff with the international community.

Yet in May, shortly before he was elected, Rouhani appeared on state-run IRIB TV to defend his nuclear work, appearing defensive as a hard-line interviewer essentially accused him of bowing before the West. We may one day thank the interviewer, Hassan Abedini, for pushing Rouhani on the subject. According to an [account](#) of the conversation published in the Times of Israel, Rouhani at one point became flustered by the insinuation that, as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator 10 years ago, he kowtowed to the West by bringing his country's nuclear activities to a stop.

"We halted the nuclear program?" he asked, rhetorically. "We were the ones to complete it! We completed the technology."

Abedini pushed Rouhani harder, claiming that uranium enrichment at a facility in Isfahan had been suspended while Rouhani was in charge.

Rouhani denied the accusation, and then claimed credit for the development of a heavy-water reactor in Arak in 2004.

"Do you know when we developed yellowcake? Winter 2004. Do you know when the number of centrifuges reached 3,000? Winter 2004."

Reading accounts of Rouhani's combative interview made me wonder if this might represent his personal Hudaybiyyah moment. What is a Hudaybiyyah moment? The moment when a mask slips.

In the mid-1990s, Yasser Arafat, who was then the leader of the Palestinian Authority, began giving speeches (and sermons) about the Middle East peace process, which was then progressing in earnest. There were doubts about Arafat's willingness to compromise with Israel, a nation he had long terrorized, but he appeared to be fully engaged in negotiations, and Israel's suspicious leaders appeared to have overcome many of their misgivings.

In these sermons and discussions, however, Arafat began making reference to the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, which, Muslim tradition tells us, the Prophet

Muhammad had signed with a rival tribe called the Quraysh out of tactical necessity. Two years later, by most accounts, a stronger Muhammad, citing a violation by the Quraysh as pretext, saw to it that the treaty was dissolved. He then defeated his enemy. Arafat appeared to be signaling to Muslim audiences that even if the Palestinians came to an agreement, they shouldn't fear, because an agreement with Israel wouldn't last forever. Optimists -- including me -- dismissed Arafat's invocation of the treaty as an example of a frightened politician playing to his base. The pessimists -- those who said this reference, among others, proved that Arafat was already devising an exit strategy from a still-theoretical (and ultimately unrealized) peace treaty -- were right.

The lesson of this sad episode was to listen more carefully to what leaders actually say.

Rouhani, in the interview, was in the midst of a presidential campaign and getting pressured from his right. So it's possible that he reacted defensively in the heat of the moment. But consider [this statement](#), which he wrote in 2011: "While we were talking to the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in Isfahan."

These are not the words of someone who wants to end Iran's nuclear program. Taken together, Rouhani's statements sound like those of a man who is proud of the program and believes he may have devised a way to carry it to completion: By speaking softly, smiling and spinning the centrifuges all the while.

It's obviously worth testing Rouhani's intentions through intensive diplomacy and negotiations, but it's vital to conduct this test while paying careful attention to what he's saying at home. Avoiding a Hudaybiyyah moment isn't impossible, unless we're not paying attention.

*Jeffrey Goldberg is a Bloomberg View columnist.*

[Article 5.](#)

The National Interest

## **An Interview with Graham Allison**

Harry Kazianis

October 8, 2013 -- *Editor's Note: Harry Kazianis, managing editor of the National Interest, sat down with Graham Allison, director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.*

**Harry Kazianis:** To begin, please give us your thoughts on the recent U.S.-Russian agreement concerning Syria handing over its chemical weapons: Do you feel such an agreement will be successful? Do you believe Syria will comply with such a deal and is it technically possible considering the complexities of removing and destroying chemical weapons under normal conditions—not to mention a civil war?

**Graham Allison:** An arguably good place to be at this point—given the realistic menu of lousy options. While the likelihood of glitches and shortfalls is 100%, consider the bottom line. Can anyone identify a feasible alternative that has a higher likelihood of preventing future major attacks using chemical weapons or transfer to jihadists who could use them against the United States or our allies? I can't think of one.

**HK:** A debate has brewed on the pages of TNI concerning [Russia's influence in the Middle East](#) [3]. Do you feel Russia's power and influence over the Middle East has grown because of this agreement?

**GA:** Of course—and it would be disingenuous to argue otherwise. Putin has gone from being stigmatized, isolated, and indeed snubbed when Obama cancelled the scheduled bilateral Moscow summit a month ago, to being a kingmaker who got the U.S. and the world out of a corner—and is someone whom we are dependent on for the solution we are now pursuing. This has inexorably increased Russia's credibility and influence in the region. The more important question, however, is whether Russia's national interests in the region are contrary to those of the United States.

**HK:** Turning to Iran, there has been a great deal of speculation over a possible U.S.-Iran warming of ties. Have the stars aligned enough for an agreement over Iran's nuclear program that all sides can live with? How do you consider the prospects for a wider U.S.-Iran warming of ties going forward?

**GA:** Starting with objective factors, the stars are more aligned for an agreement constraining Iran's nuclear program that will leave it verifiably short of an exercisable nuclear-weapons option (that is, an option to build nuclear weapons without being discovered in time for the United States or

Israel to prevent it from reaching the goal line) than they have been at anytime recently.

But as I ask students in my course at Harvard, how many agreements are required between two nations? Three—and the first two are most difficult. First, the contending parties within Country A must agree about what they can accept; then the parties within Country B must do the same; and finally, there has to be some overlap in the zone of agreement between Country A and Country B.

Over the past decade, when Iran was prepared to accept an agreement that should, from the perspective of American interests have been acceptable, the U.S. was unwilling. When the U.S. was prepared to offer terms that should objectively have been acceptable to Iran, divisions there made an agreement impossible. Nonetheless, I am hopeful about the current alignment—though always cognizant of Samuel Johnson’s observation about second marriages: they represent “the triumph of hope over experience.”

**HK:** Moving to China, clearly the U.S.-China relationship is the world's most important—if not most complex. Where do you see the relationship going over the long term? As yourself have noted, the rise of a new power many times creates tensions with the existing current dominant power. In what ways do you feel the relationship can be managed in order to foster cooperation— or at the very least deter a dangerous competition now and in the future?

**GA:** The “Pax Pacifica” established by the U.S. after World War II has created a security and economic order in which the nations of the region, including China, have developed more successfully than at any time in their histories. Historians will remind us, however, that there is nothing unnatural about an increasingly powerful state demanding more say and greater sway in relations with nations that impact its interests.

How we understand this challenge is critical. If I can put on my professor’s cap for a moment, how we conceptualize relations between the U.S. and China over the next decade will be decisive. To help leaders recognize the magnitude of the challenge, I have proposed the concept of Thucydides’s Trap. As Thucydides pointed out about the Peloponnesian War in 5th century BC Greece, when a rising power challenges a ruling power, expect big trouble. As he said famously, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that

this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable.” In a study I have done of the last five hundred years, in eleven of fifteen such cases, the result has been war. The point is not to be fatalistic, but to recognize the powerful structural forces at work when there is a rapid change in the relative power balance. If American and Chinese leaders perform no better than their predecessors in Classical Greece or Europe a century ago, historians of the twenty-first century will cite Thucydides in explaining the catastrophe that follows.

This means that in the years ahead, the biggest challenge for U.S.-China relations will not be the business of resolving one damned thing after another. It will be about each country developing a better understanding of how the other views the world, and about preparing themselves for the fact that massive adjustments of attitudes and actions will be required by both sides in order to avoid war.

**HK:** Finally, in the past, you have written extensively on nuclear terrorism. Do you still consider this a possible threat to the United States as well as globally?

**GA:** Absolutely. President Obama has said that nuclear terrorism is “the single biggest threat to U.S. security.” That was also the judgment of his predecessor, President Bush, and indeed of virtually everyone who has shouldered major responsibility for American national security in the decade since 9/11.

The good news is that Al Qaeda, the terrorist group that has had both the clearest intent to kill Americans massively and the organizational capacity to conduct major attacks, has been substantially weakened. The bad news is that there remains only one thing keeping terrorists, who have continued killing, but in smaller attacks, from killing thousands or tens of thousands in a single blow: despite repeated efforts, they have not succeeded in acquiring a nuclear bomb.

[Article 6.](#)

NYT

## **The International Fallout**

Editorial

October 7, 2013 -- The Republican-induced government shutdown and the party's threats to create another crisis next week over the debt ceiling are causing harm internationally as well as at home. They are undermining American leadership in Asia, impeding the functioning of the national security machinery, upsetting global markets and raising questions about the political dysfunction of a country that has long been the world's democratic standard-bearer.

The biggest foreign policy casualty, so far, may be [the cancellation last week](#) of President Obama's trip to Asia, which the president's press secretary [said was necessary](#) so he could deal with the shutdown and the political stalemate in Congress. Even though he sent Secretary of State John Kerry in his place, this was the third time that Mr. Obama had canceled or postponed a trip to Asia, further hampering his efforts to make the region a centerpiece of his foreign policy.

In Mr. Obama's absence, [China was able to grab the spotlight](#). China's leader, Xi Jinping, who became the first foreigner to address the Indonesian Parliament, offered billions of dollars in trade to that country. Mr. Xi then visited Malaysia (another stop President Obama had planned) and announced a "comprehensive strategic partnership," including an upgrade in military ties. Mr. Obama should reschedule his trip as soon as he comfortably can.

The fiscal chaos has also given China, America's largest creditor, an opportunity to scold the United States. On Monday, in the Chinese government's first public response to the stalemate in Washington, Vice Finance Minister Zhu Guangyao urged the United States to "earnestly take steps" to avoid a debt default to ensure the safety of Chinese investments and the global economic recovery.

Other financial leaders also felt compelled to speak out, including South Africa's finance minister, Pravin Gordhan, who warned that the global community has much to fear. "This is clearly an issue that might go to the brink," he told Reuters. On Monday, most global markets were lower, and the price of oil dropped as traders became increasingly anxious about the standoff in Washington, particularly over the debt ceiling.

The shutdown of the American government is being felt in other ways as well. A round of negotiations between the United States and Europe on the world's largest free-trade deal, set for next week in Brussels, was canceled

because the United States trade representative, [Michael Froman](#), said he lacked the staffing and the finances to make the trip.

And while Republicans accused the Obama administration of being ill prepared for the 2012 attack in Libya that killed four Americans, including the ambassador, the shutdown they have imposed has halted vital training for State Department security officers and improvements to American embassies.

The director of national intelligence, James Clapper Jr., told a Senate committee that furloughing 70 percent of the intelligence agencies' civilian employees was "extremely damaging" to intelligence-gathering efforts.

And, at a time when the United States is about to begin a critical round of negotiations with Iran on the nuclear program, Wendy Sherman, an undersecretary of state, has said that the shutdown has "totally depleted" the government's ability to enforce sanctions against Iran.

The shutdown is taking a toll that looks even more self-defeating when the consequences beyond America's shores are taken into account.