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[Article 1.](#)

The Council on Foreign Relations

Looking Toward Geneva II on Syria

An interview with Frederick C. Hof

January 16, 2014 -- *The second Geneva conference on Syria is scheduled to begin January 22 in Switzerland if parties opposed to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad agree to attend. The conference's purpose is to negotiate*

"the creation of a transitional governing body," says Frederic C. Hof, a former State Department adviser on Syria. But the Assad government has given no indication that it would agree to a transitional government, says Hof, and the most radical Islamist parties refuse to attend the conference. If the conference does take place, its best outcome would be that Assad agrees to allow UN humanitarian agencies full access to the country to supply food and medical supplies, Hof says.

One question about the planned conference is whether Iran will be invited. Russia and top UN officials want the Iranians there, since they are major military supporters of Syria; the United States does not.

What will happen?

Technically it is still possible for the Iranians to get an invitation if they issue a statement to the effect that Tehran fully accepts Geneva I, that is, the final communiqué of June 30, 2012, and its mandate for political transition. That would basically check the box in the eyes of the United States. Special U.N. Representative for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi takes the position that unless there's agreement between the United States and Russia on inviting a particular party, he does not feel empowered to issue an invitation. That is the condition that [Secretary of State John] Kerry has put up. In another sense, Iran can be present at Geneva in any event. The invitation is specifically for the opening session on [January 22] in Montreux. The conference itself will reconvene two days later in Geneva under Brahimi's chairmanship. And that conference will have only three parties: Brahimi, with his team; a delegation from the Syrian opposition; and a delegation from the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. However, it's quite likely that most, if not all, of the thirty countries invited to the opening ceremony will also maintain some kind of delegations in Geneva, if for no other reason than to have a listening post.

They won't be sitting around the table.

They will not be sitting around the table. Therefore, if Iran wishes to have an impact on the proceedings, it too can have a delegation in Geneva. It can have people in Geneva who can engage in discussions with the United States and others on various aspects of this.

What are the issues?

The whole purpose of the conference is a negotiated agreement on political transition—the creation of a transitional governing body. Absent that, there

is no reason to have this conference. The purpose is to implement Geneva I, which was signed on June 30, 2012. There is a range of ancillary issues that presumably could be discussed. From the point of view of Moscow, these ancillary issues—like a cease-fire, discussions about Syrian territorial integrity, sovereignty, and so forth—are the central issues. Moscow does not want the discussion to get very deeply into political transition, because it's that discussion and subject that puts its client somewhat at a disadvantage.

In other words, it does not want to discuss the turnover of the Assad regime.

That's correct. And it knows that its client does not want to discuss that subject. The Syrian information minister has made it very clear that the powers, the person, the prerogatives of President Bashar al-Assad will not be open for discussion at Geneva.

Who will represent the opposition? There are so many opposition groups.

Yes there are. According to the Friends of the Syrian People—particularly the core group of that collection of states, the so-called London Eleven—the opposition delegation will be led by the Syrian National Coalition, which at present is based in Istanbul. The delegation will also presumably contain people who are not members of that coalition.

What about the various Islamist groups and jihadist groups fighting in Syria?

There's a range of opinion within those groups as well. At the one end, you have this ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] organization and al-Qaeda affiliate, which is dead set against Geneva, against any coalition. ISIS is under some military pressure. The large town of Raqqa [in north central Syria] is the one sizeable area that ISIS took over, lock, stock, and barrel. It has been trying to impose their notion of governance on Raqqa, which is very primitive—the word "medieval" gives it too much credit. As a result, it's overreached, it's alienated a lot of people, so there is a sort of a combination of the more moderate Free Syrian Army elements and other Islamist elements that have banded together to try to push ISIS out of the picture. My strong suspicion is that the Syrian National Coalition is trying to take into consideration the views of those Islamist groups that are at least committed to a Syrian solution of some kind. ISIS has a sort of

universal al-Qaeda "set up an emirate that transcends national boundaries" approach. And ISIS has made it clear that its first priority is not to fight the regime, but to establish its form of governance in areas that it can dominate both inside Syria and in Iraq.

You wouldn't expect them to even want to come to Geneva.

The ISIS people would have absolutely nothing to do with Geneva at all. Some of the other non-al-Qaeda Islamist leaders have also expressed some hostility to the idea of negotiations at Geneva. And some of them have condemned the National Coalition for even considering this possibility. My understanding is that discussions between some of these leaders and leaders of the National Coalition are ongoing. And at least some people in the U.S. administration think that there is a possibility that many of these Islamist leaders will give their consent to the National Coalition participating in these negotiations.

If there's at least a semblance of a cease-fire, that would be a major accomplishment.

It would be. An accomplishment that would outstrip that and mean a lot more for people across the board would be the Syrian government's acceptance of the right of United Nations humanitarian agencies and personnel to go anywhere they want.

Right now that's not possible?

Right now they cannot even enter uncontested rebel-held areas, because the rules of the game for the United Nations are if you are going to operate inside any part of country X, you need the explicit permission of the government of country X. So as long as you do not have the permission of the Assad regime, you cannot even operate, bringing in humanitarian relief to areas that, say, are six to eight hundred miles beyond the control of the regime. This is a matter of the Damascus suburbs, of Aleppo, Aleppo province broadly, and to the east, where the United Nations would want to go. If the regime were to give the kind of blanket authorization that the president of the Security Council called for several weeks ago, it in effect would amount to a humanitarian truce, because it is unlikely the regime would continue artillery, aircraft rocket, and missile attacks on densely populated areas if it knew or suspected that United Nations personnel were in those areas delivering humanitarian aid. And the reason it's important, quite aside from stemming the unbelievable human cost that's taking place

here, if you want to have anything at Geneva that resembles a practical and even creative diplomatic dialogue, you've got to have conditions on the ground that actually support that.

You were very critical when the Obama administration suddenly decided not to use military force in retaliation for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. If the United States had used military force even on a limited basis, could it have brought about some kind of cease-fire and brought in more humanitarian aid at that time?

My feeling was that any military action we would have taken—and they would by definition have been air strikes, mostly by standoff weaponry; there would be no boots on the ground—probably would have been concentrated on regime aircraft and their support infrastructure, on regime artillery, and on regime rockets and missiles. And to the extent that a campaign, say, a week in length could have put a significant dent into those systems, it would have either eliminated, or significantly restricted, or downgraded the ability of the regime to bring mass fires on populated areas. That is the one thing that is happening in Syria routinely that is driving this humanitarian catastrophe more than anything else. So yes, an opportunity was missed. What happened, and you can put this in the long list of unintended consequences for Syria, was that the threat of such an attack was traded for the chemical weapons agreement. The chemical weapons agreement in and of itself is a good thing. Relieving Assad of this weaponry is good for the people of Syria; it's good for the people of the neighborhood. But the unintended consequence is that Assad took this transaction to mean he could do what he wanted to populated areas as long as he didn't do it with chemicals. And this is why we have this ongoing abomination, right on the eve of Geneva.

Would you have thought when the Syrian uprising started in 2011 that it would've kept going so long?

I was afraid from the beginning that unless the regime could somehow be dissuaded from using lethal force against peaceful demonstrators, that this thing would spread virus-like throughout Syria and eventually people opposed to the regime would be obliged to take up arms, first to defend themselves and then later to conduct operations in an effort to take down the regime. And given the fact that the Assad regime had to rely for the most part on specialized military and intelligence armed units largely

composed of minority people, mostly Alawites, my big fear was that the lethal response would eventually lead to a largely sectarian confrontation. And when you've got that kind of confrontation, whether it's sectarian or ethnic, you almost inevitably get to the point where unless it's turned off, you have results that are absolutely consistent with genocide. Whether genocide per se is in the mind of the perpetrator, I don't know. In other words, are Sunni Muslims being killed because that's who they are? Or is it simply a matter of pounding heavily-populated areas in the hope of catching three or four rebel soldiers? The bottom line is the same.

Frederic C. Hof is a senior fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council and the former Special Advisor for Transition in Syria at the US Department of State.

[Article 2.](#)

Agence Global

Syria: Intractable Dilemmas for Everyone

Immanuel Wallerstein

15 Jan 2014 -- There was a time when all, or almost all, actors in the Middle East had clear positions. Other actors were able to anticipate, with a high degree of success, how this or that actor would react to any new important development. That time is gone. If we look at the civil war in Syria today, we will rapidly see that not only are there a wide range of objectives that different actors set themselves, but also that each of the actors is beset by ferocious internal debates about what position it should be taking. Inside Syria itself, the present situation is one of a triad of basic options. There are those who, for varying reasons, essentially support keeping the present regime in power. There are those who support a so-called Salafist outcome, in which some form of Sunni shar'ia law prevails. And there are those who want neither of these outcomes, working for an outcome in which the Baath regime is ousted but a Salafist regime is not installed in its place. This is of course too simple a picture, even as a description of the positions of the internal actors. Each of these three basic positions is held by a number of different actors (shall we call them sub-actors?) who debate with themselves about the tactics their side should

pursue. Of course, the debate about tactics in the struggle is also, or really, a debate about the exact preferred outcome. However, this triangle of actors, each with multiple sub-actors, creates a situation in which there is a constant revising of very local alliances that is often hard to explain and surely difficult to anticipate.

The dilemmas are no less for the non-Syrian actors. Take the United States, once the giant in the arena, now widely recognized to be in serious decline and thereupon to have no good options. But merely to admit this is itself very controversial in the United States, and President Obama finds himself under severe political pressure by some sub-actors to do "more" and by others to do "less." This debate goes on within his own inner circle, not to mention in Congress and in the media. Iran faces the dilemma of how to improve its relations with the United States (and indeed Turkey and even Saudi Arabia) without diminishing its support for the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. The internal debate about the tactics to pursue seems just as loud and just as intense as that inside the United States. Saudi Arabia faces the dilemma of supporting Muslim groups in Syria that are friendly without strengthening the hand of groups like al-Qaeda that are pursuing the downfall of the Saudi regime. The Saudi government fears that, if it makes a mistake, it will advance the cause of those who want the internal turmoil to spread to Saudi Arabia. So, it puts pressure on the U.S. government to support Saudi objectives while simultaneously (and as quietly as possible) talking with the Iranians—not an easy game to play. The Turkish regime, which now has its own internal problems, was originally a supporter of the Syrian regime, then a fierce opponent, and today seems to be neither the one nor the other. It is seeking to recuperate its erstwhile stance as a post-Ottoman Turkey that is a powerful friend to everyone.

The Kurds, seeking maximum autonomy (if not a full-fledged independent Kurdish state), find themselves in difficult negotiations with all four states in which there are significant Kurdish populations—Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Israel can't really decide whose side it's on. It's against Iran and against Hezbollah, but up to two years ago, it had quite stable relations with the Baath regime in Syria. If Israel supports the opponents of the Syrian regime, it risks getting a far worse regime in Syria from its point of view. But if it wishes to weaken Iran and Hezbollah, it cannot be indifferent to the role the Syrian regime plays in permitting the close links

of Iran and Hezbollah. So Israel waffles, or stays mute. Internal debates beset all the non-Arab states who have some interests in the region: Russia, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy, for a start. This is geopolitical chaos, and it takes very astute maneuvering for any of the actors not to make grievous errors in terms of its own interests. In this whirlpool of continuously shifting alliances, globally and very locally, there are many groups and sub-groups who consider it tactically useful to increase the scale of the violence. The Syrian civil war is at the moment the locus of the greatest amount of violence in the Middle East, and there is little reason to expect that it will cease. It has begun to spread to Lebanon and Iraq in particular. Most of the actors are worried that the spreading of the violence, in addition to being appalling, may in fact hurt their interests rather than help them. So many actors try, in multiple ways, to restrain the spread. But can they?

When the People's Liberation Army marched into Shanghai in 1949 and established a Communist government in power, a big and futile debate erupted in the United States. It was conducted under the theme, "Who lost China?" It was as if China was something others could lose. It is likely that very soon, there will be debates in many countries about "Who lost Syria?" Indeed these debates seem to have started already. The fact is that, in a state of geopolitical chaos, most actors have very limited ability to affect the outcome. The Middle East is careening out of control, and we shall be lucky to escape the crash.

Immanuel Wallerstein, Senior Research Scholar at Yale University, is the author of [The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World](#) (New Press).

[Article 3.](#)

The Washington Post

Making things worse in the Middle East

[Fareed Zakaria](#)

Over the past few months, the Middle East has become an even more violent place than usual. Iraq is now once again home to one of the most

bloody civil wars in the world, after Syria of course, which is the worst. Watching these horrors unfold, many in the United States are convinced that this is Washington's fault or that, at the very least, the Obama administration's "passive" approach toward the region has allowed instability to build. In fact, the last thing the region needs is more U.S. intervention.

The Middle East is in the midst of a sectarian struggle, like those between Catholics and Protestants in Europe in the age of the Reformation. These tensions are rooted in history and politics and will not easily go away. Three factors have led us to this state of affairs. First, the structure of Middle Eastern states. The modern Middle East was created by the colonial powers at the end of World War I. The states the British and French created, often with little forethought, were composed of disparate groups that had no history of being governed as one entity. Iraq, for example, was formed by putting together three Ottoman provinces that had little in common.

The colonial powers often chose a set of rulers who came from a minority group. (It was a cunning strategy. A minority regime always needs the help of some outside force to rule.) Thus the French, when facing a nationalist insurgency in Syria in the 1930s and 1940s, recruited heavily from the then-persecuted Alawite minority, which came to dominate the army and, in particular, the officer corps of the country.

The second factor at work has been the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism. Its causes are various — the rise of Saudi Arabia and its export of puritanical Wahhabi ideas, the Iranian revolution and the discrediting of Westernization as the secular republics in the region morphed into military dictatorships.

The most important states in the Middle East — Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, for example — were not sectarian; in fact, they stressed their secular mind-set. But over time, as these regimes failed, they drew increasingly from particular tribes that were loyal to them. Saddam Hussein's Iraq went from mildly sectarian to rabidly so by the 1990s. Often the new sectarianism reinforced existing patterns of domination. When you travel in the Middle East, you often hear that these Sunni-Shiite differences are wholly invented and that people always lived happily together in the old days. These comments are almost always made by

Sunnis, who assumed that their Shiite brethren, who were rarely seen or heard in the corridors of power, were perfectly content with their subordinate status.

The third factor is one involving Washington deeply: the invasion of Iraq. If a single action accelerated the sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, it was the decision of the George W. Bush administration to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, dismantle all structures in which Sunnis had power and then hand over the Iraqi state to Shiite religious parties.

Washington in those days was consumed with the idea of transforming the Middle East and paid little attention to the sectarian dimensions of what it was unleashing. I met with the current prime minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, in 2005 when he held no office. I described him then as "[a hard-line Shiite](#), unyielding in his religious views and extremely punitive toward the Sunnis. He did not strike me as a man who wanted national reconciliation." It was also clear that, having lived in exile in Syria and Iran for almost two decades, Maliki was close to both those regimes, which had sheltered him and his colleagues. Bush administration officials dismissed these concerns and told me that Maliki believed in democracy and pluralism.

The consequences of these policies are now clear. The Shiites proceeded to oppress the Sunnis — seemingly with Washington's blessings. More than 2 million Iraqis — mostly Sunnis and Christians — fled the country, never to return. The Sunni minority in Iraq, which still had delusions of power, began fighting back as an insurgency and then became more extreme and Islamist. These tribes are all tied by blood and kinship to Sunni tribes in their next-door neighbor, Syria, and those Syrian Sunnis were radicalized as they watched the Iraqi civil war.

As violence has flared up in Iraq again, a bevy of Bush administration officials has risen to argue that if only the United States were more actively involved in Iraq, had a few thousand troops there, fought against Sunni militants while pressing Maliki more firmly, things would be very different. Not only does this perspective misunderstand the very deep nature of the conflict in the Middle East but it also fails to see that Washington choosing one side over another made matters substantially worse. One more round of U.S. intervention, in a complex conflict of religion and politics, will only add fuel to the fires in the Middle East.

Israel Lobby Thwarted in Iran Sanctions Bid For Now

[Jim Lobe](#)

Jan 16 2014 - In what looks to be a clear victory – at least for now – for President Barack Obama, a major effort by the Israel lobby and its most powerful constituent, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), to pass a new sanctions bill against Iran has stalled in the U.S. Senate.

While the legislation, the “Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act of 2013,” had gathered 59 co-sponsors in the 100-member upper chamber by last week, opposition to it among Democrats appears to have mounted in recent days. That opposition apparently prompted Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who controls the floor calendar, to back away from a previous commitment to permit a vote on the measure some time over the next few weeks. As a result, [AIPAC](#) is now reportedly hoping to get the bill through the Republican-dominated House of Representatives.

Democratic resistance to the bill, which its critics say is designed to scuttle the Nov. 24 Joint Plan of Action (JPA) between Iran and the so-called P5+1 (U.S., Britain, France, Russia, China plus Germany) and any chances for a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, has grown stronger since Sunday’s successful conclusion of an implementation agreement between the two sides and by Obama’s explicit pledge to veto the bill if it comes to his desk.

Even one of the bill’s 16 Democratic co-sponsors, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, said this week that he saw no need for a vote “as long as there is progress” in implementing the Nov. 24 accord.

The accord, which formally takes effect Jan. 20, will ease some economic sanctions that have been imposed against Iran and ban any new ones in exchange for Tehran’s freezing and, in some cases, a rolling back key elements of its nuclear programme pending the negotiation within a year of a comprehensive agreement designed to prevent Tehran from achieving a

nuclear “breakout capacity”, or the ability to build a bomb within a short period of time.

That goal is widely considered to be the single-most important – and potentially dangerous, both politically and strategically — foreign policy challenge facing Obama in his second term.

While Obama has pledged to use all means necessary, including taking military action, to prevent Tehran from obtaining a bomb, he has made little secret of his strong desire to avoid becoming engaged in yet another war in the Middle East, a desire that appears widely held both within the foreign policy and military elite, as well as the general public, according to recent opinion polls.

For its part, Iran has long said it has no intention of building a bomb. But it has also insisted that any final agreement must recognise its “right” under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium to levels consistent with the needs of a civil nuclear programme.

While the administration and the other P5+1 powers appear inclined to accept a deal that would, among other things, permit limited enrichment under an enhanced inspection regime, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has demanded that any final accord should effectively dismantle Iran’s nuclear programme, including its enrichment capabilities. Netanyahu’s demands are largely reflected in the pending Senate bill which is named for its co-sponsors, Republican Sen. Mark [Kirk](#) and Democratic [Sen. Robert Menendez](#), each of whom received [more campaign money from AIPAC-related political-action committees](#) than any other senatorial candidates during their runs for office – in 2010 and 2012, respectively. The bill would impose sweeping new sanctions against Tehran if it fails either to comply with the terms of the Nov. 24 accord or reach a comprehensive accord within one year. Such sanctions would also take effect if Iran conducts a test for ballistic missiles with a range exceeding 500 kms or if it is found to have directly or by proxy supported a terrorist attack against U.S. individuals or property.

While the bill’s supporters insist that those provisions will strengthen the administration’s hand in negotiations over a comprehensive agreement, critics, including administration officials, [argue](#) that they violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the Nov. 24 agreement and would, if passed, open up Washington to charges by its P5+1 partners, as well as Iran, of bad faith.

The bill also requires that any final agreement include, among other things, “dismantlement of Iran’s enrichment ...capabilities” – a condition that Tehran has already declared a deal-breaker.

And it calls for Washington to provide military and other support to Israel if its government “is compelled to take military action in legitimate self-defense against Iran’s nuclear weapon program” – a provision that was denounced on the Senate floor by Intelligence Committee chairwoman, Dianne Feinstein, as “let(ting) Israel determine when and where the U.S. goes to war.” In a [detailed speech](#) Tuesday, she also described the bill as facilitating a “march to war.”

All of these provisions have lent credibility to the administration’s charge that the main purpose of the legislation is to sabotage the Nov. 24 deal and the negotiations, rather than support to them.

When first introduced nearly a month ago, the bill was co-sponsored by 26 senators, equally divided between Republicans and Democrats, apparently in order to give it a bipartisan cast. But all but three of the additional 33 co-sponsors are Republicans, thus making it an increasingly partisan issue. Eleven Democratic committee chairs, including Feinstein and Senate Armed Services Committee chief Carl Levin, have come out against a vote on the bill, as has Reid’s deputy, Majority Whip Dick Durbin, who, like Reid, normally defers to AIPAC’s wishes.

In recent days, a number of other influential voices have come out in opposition to the bill. Bill Clinton’s second-term national security adviser, Sandy Berger, [warned](#) that a vote on the legislation now raised the “risk of upending the negotiations before they start,” while former Sen. Dick Lugar, until last year the top Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, told a Yale University audience Wednesday that Congress “ought to give diplomacy a chance.”

Similarly, former Pentagon chief Bob Gates, currently touting his memoir of his years under Obama and President George W. Bush, [warned](#) Tuesday that enacting new sanctions would be “a terrible mistake” and a “strategic error.”

Several prominent newspapers, including the New York Times, the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, USA Today, the Denver Post, and the strongly pro-Israel Washington Post, have also editorialised against the bill in recent days.

The bill, moreover, appears to have created dissension within the organised Jewish community, which ordinarily rallies behind AIPAC's legislative agenda.

While progressive Jewish groups, notably J Street and Americans for Peace Now, joined [60 other grassroots religious, humanitarian, anti-war, and civic-action organisations](#) in actively opposing the bill by flooding Democratic senators with emails, petitions and phone calls over the past few days, more conservative Jewish groups and influential opinion-shapers, such as New York Times columnists Tom Friedman and Jeffrey Goldberg, also defended the administration's opposition.

Rabbi Jack Moline, the director of the National Jewish Democratic Council (NJDC), publicly [accused](#) AIPAC of using "strong-arm tactics, essentially threatening people that if they didn't vote a particular way, that somehow that makes them anti-Israel or means the abandonment of the Jewish community."

"The bill before the U.S. Senate ...will not achieve the denuclearization of Iran," Goldberg, a self-described "Iran hawk," [wrote](#) in his Bloomberg column this week. "What it could do is move the U.S. closer to war with Iran and, crucially, make Iran appear – even to many of the U.S.'s allies – to be the victim of American intransigence, even aggression."

Jim Lobe's blog on U.S. foreign policy can be read at 

[Article 5.](#)

Al-Monitor

Burns: 'No illusions' about nuclear diplomacy with Iran

[Laura Rozen](#)

January 16, 2014 -- As a team of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency heads to Iran to oversee on Monday, Jan. 20, the dismantling of Iran's 20% enrichment cascades, the US diplomat who was asked by the president to try to start a bilateral channel with Iran to advance a nuclear agreement has to date said little about his role.

But in an exclusive interview with Al-Monitor on Jan. 14, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns spoke for the first time about [the back channel to Iran](#) that he led, which gained momentum after Iran's election of President Hassan Rouhani in June, and culminated in November with the first agreement to halt the expansion of Iran's nuclear program in a decade. Burns, only the second career foreign service officer to be confirmed as deputy secretary of state, credits a team of US and foreign diplomatic colleagues, some who have gone largely unsung, for the success of the effort. Among those Burns singled out for praise were top State Department non-proliferation adviser [James Timbie](#), "truly a national treasure," and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who has led the negotiations on behalf of six world powers with Iran, "an enormously skillful diplomat."

He also credits the tough-minded professionalism and "clear sense of purpose" of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team put in place after Rouhani, in August, appointed Iran's former UN envoy Mohammad Javad Zarif as his foreign minister, tapping him to oversee Iran's nuclear negotiations. "The issues remain very complicated ones," Burns said. "Having said that, I certainly found the Iranian officials with whom we worked to be quite skillful, quite professional, and I think determined in what they see to be the best interests of Iran in trying to reach a negotiated resolution. That makes for a set of tough negotiations. But I have a good deal of professional respect for the people with whom our team and I were meeting."

With negotiations set to begin in February between Iran and the P5+1 on a comprehensive nuclear accord, Burns said President Barack Obama's estimate of 50-50 odds of reaching an agreement is not bad, considering the context.

"The truth is, against the backdrop of the tortuous history of the relationship between the United States and Iran, that's actually not a bad opportunity to be tested," Burns said. "And I think it's very important for us to test it, having created the circumstance now through the Joint Plan of Action, in which we have stopped the advance of the Iranian nuclear program, and in a couple of important respects rolled it back."

"There are no illusions about the challenge ahead," he said of reaching a comprehensive nuclear deal. But while the issues involved in the

forthcoming negotiations are “very complicated,” he said, a resolution should be achievable.

“The truth is, at the end of the day ... if Iran wants to demonstrate that it has no interest in pursuing a nuclear weapon ... we’ve made clear, as the president has, we accept a civil nuclear program for Iran, then it should not be impossible to reach an agreement,” he said

On prospects for a broader thaw or easing of tensions between Iran and the United States, Burns said the two governments still have broad differences beyond the nuclear dispute, which remains most urgent.

“Certainly over time I think you see a lot of potential in the attitude of Iranian citizens toward greater connections with the rest of the world and greater connections with American society, however difficult relations are between governments,” he said.

“Having said that, I think we both have an awful lot of baggage in our political relationship, and it’s going to take time and a great deal of effort to deal with all of the differences between us,” he said. “I think the nuclear issue, as both of us recognize now, is not the only one of those differences, but it’s the most urgent.”

“What the long-term possibilities are between the United States and Iran is very difficult to predict right now, given the range of differences between us,” Burns said. “But I do think it’s possible to make further progress on the nuclear issue, and I think that’s extremely important.”

Among the major differences between the United States and Iran, of course, is Syria and the future role of Syria’s Bashar al-Assad — one reason the United States continues to insist that Iran should formally endorse the Geneva I communique on a Syrian political transition before it be formally invited to attend [the Geneva II Syria peace talks](#) set to get underway next week.

The US position on participation in Geneva II is “not born of any romantic ideas about the process or about Iran’s role,” Burns said. “It’s really born of the practical notion that, if Geneva II is aimed at implementation of the Geneva I communique, including political transition, then logically, countries participating ought to make clear their commitment to it.”

“We see [Geneva II] as the beginning of a process, a process that’s aimed at political transition,” he said. “Along the way, as the secretary said, you can focus on practical steps like localized cease-fires, humanitarian access,

prisoner exchanges, which can help create an atmosphere in which progress toward that political transition is possible.”

As for a role for Iran in possibly facilitating some of those practical steps, such as localized cease-fires, Burns said the United States would welcome it. “Listen, [REDACTED] certainly welcome any Iranian contributions toward progress in those practical steps,” he said. “I mean, that’s very much in the interest of the people of Syria, and of the region.”

The United States also has deep concerns about the rise of Sunni extremist groups in Syria and the spillover of jihadist violence out of Syria, Burns said.

Secretary of State John Kerry, in “lengthy conversations” with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal in Paris this week, “emphasized again our concerns about the rise of violent extremist groups, the danger of spillover, the importance of success in Geneva II,” Burns said. “I think the Saudis increasingly share a number of those concerns, especially about the sorts of Sunni extremist groups that have in recent weeks, up until the last week or so, been expanding the territory on which they are operating in Syria. There has been encouragingly pushback from others in the opposition in the last week or 10 days.”

Asked about the role for covert diplomacy in bringing about the opening of the US-Iran diplomatic channel, Burns said it’s hard in the age of Twitter and email to conduct secret diplomacy, but such discretion was imperative given the sensitivities and mistrust between Washington and Tehran. “I am convinced that the only way to get this particular process started was to do it quietly, and we did everything we could to try to bring that about, which is not an easy thing in this day and age.”

He acknowledged that US and Iranian nuclear negotiators have been in direct contact by phone and email, beyond the [private and public meetings now acknowledged to have occurred throughout the fall](#). Little surprise, perhaps, given the attention to both public and private diplomacy that Rouhani and Zarif and their team have shown, for instance, in their Rosh Hashana Twitter greetings, and in their direct engagement with numerous journalists covering the issue.

As for his own plans after 32 years as a US diplomat, Burns said he continues to love the job, and work hard at it. Will he stay on to see through the reaching of a comprehensive nuclear accord with Iran, after

getting the bilateral channel going? Burns said that for the past six years in the No. 2 and No. 3 jobs in the State Department, advance planning for him often consists of what he's doing tomorrow. But he acknowledged that the decades of relationships he forged with counterparts around the world had helped the president achieve the goal of a bilateral dialogue with Iran to advance a nuclear agreement.

"I think diplomacy at the end of the day is not just about issues or difficulties," Burns said. "It's about people. And it's about trying to work with people to see if you can find common ground."

Below is an edited transcript of the interview.

Al-Monitor: President Obama asked you to see if you could get this bilateral diplomatic channel with Iran going, and you managed to succeed. How did you bring it about? And where do you see channel going?

Burns: First, I was very lucky to be part of a really fine team of people in this effort, including people like [State Department non-proliferation adviser] Jim Timbie, who don't always get their names in a newspaper. But, you know, Jim is someone who has done non-proliferation issues for decades, and he's truly a national treasure. It was a really fine team of people to work with. Second, I have long been a believer in the importance of direct engagement or contact with people, whether they are your partners, your adversaries. It's the only way I think to test whether or not you can make progress diplomatically, even on the hardest of issues. And the Iranian nuclear issue I think is one of the most complicated before us. So that is something, as you know, that the president made very clear was a priority from the beginning of his first term. And so we worked hard at trying to produce that kind of a channel. And you know I think we hope to lay a basis that the P5+1 was then able to turn into an agreement and provide a foundation for now what is a complicated effort to try to reach a comprehensive solution.

Al-Monitor: Do you see that the P5+1 and bilateral channels will fuse and become an integrated, umbrella unit?

Burns: Sure, I think what you saw before Geneva, we had always seen the bilateral effort as trying to create a basis that would accelerate progress in the 5+1. And so the 5+1 is very much in the lead. And the negotiations are likely to begin in February with the Iranians. [EU foreign policy chief]

Cathy Ashton will lead that effort. She is an enormously skillful diplomat, someone I admire a lot. And as with the other members of the 5+1, I think it is logical that there are going to be bilateral contacts to complement the core effort of the 5+1. And we have already seen examples of that. Not just by the United States, but other countries, other partners as well in the 5+1. So I think that will be very much the frame within which you see the diplomacy in the coming months.

Al-Monitor: Given the accelerated pace of US-Iran meetings since Rouhani's election, are the new Iran negotiators very different in their positions from the past team? Is their stance wholly new? Do you think there is some continuity here? What is your sense of that? How much are the players now in Iran, their receptivity, key to the success of the negotiations?

Burns: The issues remain very complicated ones. That is not going to exactly shock anybody. And so this is going to be a difficult path ahead. Having said that, I certainly found the Iranian officials with whom we worked to be quite skillful, quite professional, and I think determined in what they see to be the best interests of Iran in trying to reach a negotiated resolution. That makes for a set of tough negotiations. But I have a good deal of professional respect for the people with whom our team and I were meeting.

Al-Monitor: How much does the longevity of your professional and diplomatic relationships with players, with officials, around the world, over time, help you help the president, help the administration. You have been doing this a long time. Someone told me you were close with the sultan of Oman. You served as ambassador to Russia. I was curious if any of those relationships had been links ...

Burns: I think diplomacy at the end of the day is not just about issues or difficulties, it's about people. And it's about trying to work with people to see if you can find common ground, to recognize those areas of difference that you can bridge. And so for any effective diplomat, it's really important to build up that set of relationships over the course of a career. We are lucky in the US government to have lots of very effective diplomats, who have that kind of experience and those kinds of connections, not just in the Middle East but in other areas as well.

Al-Monitor: ... But in the absence of US-Iran relations for 34 years, that has to impact the ability of officials on both sides to understand each other.

Burns: It does. After more than three decades without sustained direct contact, it's a challenge to reacquire the habit. And you have a few people like John Limbert, who worked in the [Near East bureau] in the first term, with whom I enjoyed working a great deal, who has beautiful Farsi and served, was a hostage in Tehran during the hostage crisis. But that generation of people by and large has moved out of the [Foreign] Service. But one thing that we did, which was one of those rare instances of the State Department looking ahead, was a decade ago or so beginning to develop a cadre of Farsi speakers, based in posts around the world, but in posts that are either near Iran, like Dubai. And so that we would be prepared for the day when this kind of [direct contact] resumed.

Al-Monitor: Like [State Department Persian-language spokesman] Alan Eyre.

Burns: Yes. So we quite consciously tried to build up that cadre of people. And Alan Eyre is a good example. He is a really fine officer, and without that kind of a feel for not only languages but cultures and political systems, it's really hard to navigate effectively diplomatically. And so we have quite consciously tried to build that.

Al-Monitor: The new diplomatic team in Iran are very talented in public diplomacy, they are on Twitter ... sometimes responding by email. They are trying to affect what's understood here [in Washington], because they understand it's important for their interests and what they are trying to achieve. Given their level of attention and engagement, it would seem that they would probably email and call you and your team, too ...

Burns: Yeah ... It is, when you think of the meeting that Secretary Kerry had with Foreign Minister Zarif, and the presidents' phone call, the bilateral contacts that we set up. ... It almost now does not seem very surprising that American officials and Iranian officials engage. Just a few months ago, that would have been, at least for many people, a bit harder to imagine. So it's also not surprising that you find other ways to stay in touch. But as I said, I have found the group of people mainly from the Foreign Ministry with whom I've dealt to be quite professional. Tough negotiators, but quite professional.

Syria

Al-Monitor: Let me transition to Syria. We've seen Iran Foreign Minister Zarif do his regional tour this week ... including in Lebanon, laying a wreath at [former Hezbollah commander] Imad Mughniyeh's tomb, casting an image a bit at odds from the one he has had in the nuclear negotiation. ... Do you think the Iranians should be at Geneva II?

Burns: First ■ say the issues you raised are a reminder that we have lots of quite serious differences with Iran that go well beyond the nuclear issue, whether it's on Syria, Lebanon, Yemen. And we've never been shy about making those concerns clear. Second, with regard to Geneva II, you know the secretary was very clear again earlier this week in underscoring our position, which is that participation in Geneva II — and this has been sort of the common understanding for the other participants, and the basis on which they are participating — is acceptance of the Geneva I communique, and the commitment to its implementation. Which, again, is not just about political transition. I mean, people rightly focus on the importance of creating a transitional government with full executive powers, reached by mutual consent. But Geneva I and the Geneva I communique also address issues such as cease-fires and humanitarian access. So the secretary again has reinforced that we are quite realistic about all the impediments on the path ahead. With regard to Geneva II, we see it as the beginning of a process, a process that's aimed at political transition, because that's the only way that we and many others around the world can seek to end the civil war in a way which not only stabilizes Syria and realizes the rights of its people, but also prevents the dangerous spillover of violent extremism out of Syria. And so, the purpose of Geneva is to begin that process. Along the way, as the secretary said, you can focus on practical steps like localized cease-fires, humanitarian access, prisoner exchanges, which can help create an atmosphere in which progress toward that political transition is possible. And that is how I define a good beginning is to make a little bit of traction on those issues and keep people pointed at a political transition, recognizing that transition to a new leadership is essential, that's the core goal, but that it is going to take a lot of work there.

Al-Monitor: Especially with practical steps a more achievable short-term goal [from Geneva II] than perhaps the end of the political transition, why not have the Iranians there, as your former colleague Jeff Feltman, now at the United Nations, and others have suggested, not out of any romantic

notions about Iran's role in Syria. But because they could conceivably help or impact some of the practical steps.

Burns: Well, listen, [REDACTED] certainly welcome any Iranian contributions toward progress in those practical steps. I mean, that's very much in the interest of the people of Syria, and of the region. But you know the secretary made pretty clear what our consistent position has been and remains with regard to participation. It's not born of any romantic ideas about the process or about Iran's role. It's really born of the practical notion that, if Geneva II is aimed at implementation of the Geneva I communique, including political transition, then logically countries participating ought to make clear their commitment to it.

Al-Monitor: Do you see anything coming out of the meeting in Moscow Thursday between Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem and Iran Foreign Minister Zarif? Possibly the kind of helpful step Secretary Kerry mentioned would be welcomed from Iran.

Burns: Secretary [Kerry] had a long conversation with Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey] Lavrov [at a meeting in Paris Jan. 13] about a lot of these issues. ... I wasn't at the meeting, but my impression is that the Russians understand the value of trying to accomplish some of those steps. They certainly have a considerable amount of leverage in trying to produce that. They've demonstrated that in the agreement to destroy chemical weapons. So the secretary strongly encouraged Minister Lavrov to push not only Moallem in the Syrian regime, but also anybody else with influence, including the Iranians, to agree to those kind of steps. And that would create an atmosphere in which we can make that kind of good beginning in Geneva II.

Al-Monitor: I wondered, if you see a hesitancy on the part of the Iranian Foreign Ministry side to get dragged too deep into the Geneva II process, given the sense the team is focused on the nuclear issue, which if resolved could bring some economic relief to the Iranian public, and the sense as well that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) more than the Iranian Foreign Ministry has more sway over Iran's Syria policy.

Burns: I have learned over the years that foreign ministries can speak for themselves, and certainly the Iranian Foreign Ministry can.

Al-Monitor: So you think the US objective for Geneva II is some sort of practical step, such as a cease-fire?

Burns: ... It's to begin a process that is aimed at implementation of the Geneva I communique, in particular aimed at political transition, and along the way, I think it creates opportunities to push for steps like localized cease-fires, humanitarian access, prisoner exchanges, that can create a little bit of momentum in the direction of a transition. And I think that is a pragmatic way of looking at it. And I think it's certainly something to which we are very committed. And the London 11 ministers in the public statement that they raised underscored the value of that as well. And the support for the SOC and the Syrian opposition which have some important choices of their own to make [this week].

Al-Monitor: How do you characterize the Saudi position on Syria?

Burns: The secretary, in the lengthy conversations he had with [Saudi Foreign Minister] Prince Saud [al-Faisal] over the past two days, emphasized again our concerns about the rise of violent extremist groups, the danger of spillover, the importance of success in Geneva II. I think the Saudis increasingly share a number of those concerns especially about especially the sorts of Sunni extremist groups that have in recent weeks, up until the last week or so, been expanding the territory on which they are operating in Syria. There has been encouragingly pushback from others in the opposition in the last week or 10 days. So I think the Saudi set of concerns based on the secretary's conversation with Saudi is quite similar to our own.

Al-Monitor: It seemed like the Islamic Front suddenly became quite effective on the ground, beyond money. Do you see organizational or command/control support coming — from Western special forces?

Burns: No, there's been no shortage, sadly, of support for groups like that, and it's been a constant theme of the dialogue we've had with some of our friends in the Gulf has been to underscore the dangers of that, and underscore the importance going back more than a year of a singular focus on support for the SMC [Supreme Military Council] and the groups connected with it in the armed opposition in Syria. Obviously that's been an imperfect process but it remains extremely important.

Al-Monitor: Looking back on the initial skepticism that widely greeted the US-Russia plan to destroy Syria's chemical weapons. It seems to have been implemented largely as advertised.

Burns: First, it's a good thing objectively to deprive the Syrian regime of a very large chemical weapons arsenal. A good thing from the point of view of the people of Syria against whom these weapons have been used, a good thing for the region, which faced the risk of further use. And I think we and the Russians have worked effectively together on that issue. There's still a large task ahead of us in terms of completing the implementation and completing the destruction. But we're pointed in the right direction.

Al-Monitor: But there's not been obstruction, which I think was a concern by some when the agreement was announced.

Burns: No. So far it is pointed in the right direction. There are a lot of both logistical and security issues, and we need to keep at this because it's very important to keep up the momentum. A very ambitious timetable was set. We are going to do everything we can along with the Russians to bring this to a conclusion.

Al-Monitor: Where do you see [US-Iran] relations going? You've heard both Rouhani and Obama say, let's try to get a nuclear agreement, and then we'll see. Perhaps it's naive, but the stance of this new team seems more engaged and not overly, uber hostile to the United States.

Burns: Well, certainly, over time I think you see a lot of potential in the attitude of Iranian citizens toward greater connections with the rest of the world and greater connections with American society, however difficult relations are between governments. Having said that, I think we both have an awful lot of baggage in our political relationship, and it's going to take time and a great deal of effort to deal with all of the differences between us. I think the nuclear issue, as both of us recognize now, is not the only one of those differences, but it's the most urgent. And it's on that basis that both bilaterally and working with our partners in the 5+1 we have made some progress. Having said that, and the president and the secretary made this clear, there are no illusions about the challenge ahead on the nuclear issue. Negotiations toward a comprehensive solution are going to be extremely difficult. The president has put the odds at 50-50. And the truth is, against the backdrop of the tortuous history of relationship between the United States and Iran, that's actually not a bad opportunity to be tested. And I think it's very important for us to test it, having created the circumstance now through the Joint Plan of Action, in which we have

stopped the advance of the Iranian nuclear program, and in a couple of important respects rolled it back. So the issues involved in the forthcoming set of negotiations with the 5+1 are very complicated issues like Arak, the heavy water reactor, for which we are convinced there's no civil nuclear purpose. So this is going to take a great deal of effort on the part of everybody engaged in that negotiation. What the long-term possibilities are between the United States and Iran is very difficult to predict right now given the range of differences between us. But I do think it's possible to make further progress on the nuclear issue, and I think that's extremely important.

Al-Monitor: In September, Zarif, at the United Nations, and in various settings since then, said we don't want a nuclear weapon and it's in our interest to convince the world that we don't want a nuclear weapon. Sort of setting out a common objective. ■■■ curious, did it convince you ... ?

Burns: Some Iranians, certainly Zarif, have been quite public in asserting that. And the truth is, it's, at the end of the day, not that difficult to demonstrate that you are not pursuing a nuclear weapon and demonstrate that it's for peaceful purposes. And that's the challenge before us. We've made some headway with the initial agreement reached, we have a long way to go. But if at the end of the day, Iran wants to demonstrate that it has no interest in pursuing a nuclear weapon, at the end of the day, we've made clear, as the president has, we accept a civil nuclear program for Iran, then it should not be impossible to reach an agreement. But it's going to take a lot of work to demonstrate the seriousness with which Iran wants to show that it has an exclusively peaceful program.

Al-Monitor: I am curious, even under the old Iran administration, before Rouhani, they were willing to at least test the possibility of bilateral dialogue. They showed up, at least a few times. Would it have been possible to make progress had [former Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed] Jalili been elected president?

Burns: It's an interesting question. And in the end, I can only judge it by the experience we had over the course of the last seven or eight months, since the elections.

Al-Monitor: Did you think in the March [US-Iran meeting in Oman] that there was a possibility for progress?

Burns: You know, I've always thought, as I said before, that it's important to try to build a direct set of contacts. But certainly after the election, Rouhani's election, Zarif coming to the Foreign Ministry, his team there, there was a clear sense of purpose ... on both sides. I think on both sides, a very tough-minded approach to the negotiations which has made for a complicated process, but has also produced some results.

Al-Monitor: Can the process survive without you? Will you stay to see this through to a comprehensive agreement? I know you tried to dump the Iran nuclear portfolio on Wendy Sherman when she came on as under secretary. What do they have to get you to stay?

Burns: I enjoy very much what I do as a diplomat for the last 32 years. A lot of times in the job I am in, especially the last six years in the No. 3 job and now the No. 2 job, advance planning for me is sometimes what I am going to do tomorrow. So I continue to enjoy this job a great deal and I continue to work as hard as I can, not just on this issue but also on others.

Al-Monitor: What is the role for secret diplomacy?

Burns: It's interesting, because at this day and age it's very difficult to do anything quietly.

Al-Monitor: Is it really though? Because you guys did it.

Burns: It is hard. But I am convinced that in this case, given the particular history of our relationship, getting it started quietly was the only way to make progress. But to answer your question, no, it's not easy.

Al-Monitor: I mean, is there a role for dissembling? ... Public schedules were [misleading] ...

Burns: Honestly, I am not a natural dissembler. ... I am convinced that the only way to get this particular process started was to do it quietly, and we did everything we could to try to bring that about, which is not an easy thing in this day and age.

[Article 6.](#)

The Washington Post

How in good conscience?

[Charles Krauthammer](#)

By early 2011, writes former defense secretary Robert Gates, [he had concluded](#) that President Obama “doesn’t believe in his own [Afghanistan] strategy, and doesn’t [consider the war to be his.](#)”

Not his? America is at war and he’s America’s commander in chief. For the soldier being shot at in the field, it makes no difference under whose administration the fighting began. In fact, [three out of four](#) Americans killed in Afghanistan have died under Barack Obama’s command. That’s ownership enough.

Moreover, Gates’s doubts about Obama had begun long before. A year earlier, trying to understand how two senior officials could be openly working against expressed policy, Gates concluded that “the most likely explanation was that the president himself did not really believe the strategy he had approved would work.” This, just four months after Obama ordered his [30,000 troop “surge”](#) into Afghanistan, [warning the nation](#) that “[our security is at stake](#) . . . the security of our allies, and the common security of the world.”

The odd thing about Gates’s insider revelation of Obama’s lack of faith in his own policy is that we knew it all along. Obama was emitting discordant notes from the very beginning. In the West Point “surge” speech itself, the very sentence after that announcement consisted of the further announcement that the additional troops would be withdrawn in 18 months. How can any commander be so precise so far in advance about an enterprise as inherently contingent and unpredictable? It was a signal to friend and foe that he wasn’t serious. And as if to amplify that signal, Obama added that “the nation that ████ most interested in building is our own,” thus immediately undermining the very importance of the war to which he was committing new troops.

Such stunning ambivalence, [I wrote at the time](#), had produced the most uncertain trumpet ever sounded by a president. One could sense that Obama’s heart was never in it.

And now we know. Indeed, this became hauntingly clear to Obama’s own defense secretary within just a few months — before the majority of the troops had arrived in the field, before the new strategy had even been tested.

How can a commander in good conscience send troops on a mission he doesn’t believe in, a mission from which he knows some will never return?

Even worse, Obama ordered a major escalation, expending much blood but not an ounce of his own political capital. Over the next four years, notes Gates with chagrin, Obama ignored the obligation of any commander to explain, support and try to rally the nation to the cause.

And when he finally terminated the surge, he did so in the [middle of the 2012 fighting season](#). Militarily incoherent — but politically convenient. It allowed Obama to campaign for reelection proclaiming that “[the tide of war is receding](#).”

One question remains, however. If he wasn't committed to the mission, if he didn't care about winning, why did Obama throw these soldiers into battle in the first place?

Because for years the Democrats had used Afghanistan as a talking point to rail against the Iraq War — while avoiding the politically suicidal appearance of McGovernite pacifism. As consultant [Bob Shrum later admitted](#), “I was part of the 2004 Kerry campaign, which elevated the idea of Afghanistan as ‘the right war’ to conventional Democratic wisdom. This was accurate as criticism of the Bush Administration, but it was also reflexive and perhaps by now even misleading as policy.”

Translation: They were never really serious about Afghanistan. (Nor apparently about Iraq either. [Gates recounts with some shock](#) that Hillary Clinton admitted she opposed the Iraq surge for political reasons, and Obama conceded that much of the opposition had indeed been political.) The Democratic mantra — Iraq War, bad; Afghan War, good — was simply a partisan device to ride anti-Bush, anti-Iraq War feeling without appearing squishy.

Look, they could say: We're just being tough and discriminating.

Iraq is a dumb war, said Obama repeatedly. It's a [war of choice](#).

Afghanistan is a [war of necessity](#), the central front in the war on terror.

Having run on that, Obama had a need to at least make a show of trying to win the good war, the smart war.

“If I had ever come to believe the military part of the strategy would not lead to success as I defined it,” writes Gates. “I could not have continued signing the deployment orders.” The commander in chief, [Gates's book](#) makes clear, had no such scruples.