

From: Jeffrey Epstein <jeevacation@gmail.com>
To: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]>
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From: Office of Terje Rod-Larsen <[REDACTED]>
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NYT

Another Syria Peace Conference

Editorial

JAN. 21, 2014 -- Few peace conferences have been set up amid the unrelenting pessimism that surrounds the talks involving Syria that open Wednesday in Switzerland. But while a peace agreement is unlikely to be reached anytime soon, the meeting can still produce useful results. That has to be the approach of the conveners, including the United States, Russia and the United Nations. Crucial early goals should include a cease-fire and the delivery of humanitarian assistance to millions of desperate civilians.

There were some shaky moments before the conference, which has taken months to arrange, even got started, not least when the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, issued a last-minute invitation for Iran to attend, then rescinded it after strong objections from America; from Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival; and from the Syrian opposition. The United States has said that Iran could not participate without publicly accepting a 2012 communiqué that is the basis of the conference and stipulates that the goal is a transitional administration by "mutual consent" of the Assad government and the opposition.

In the view of the United States, this means that President Bashar al-Assad would be replaced, although Assad government officials and his Alawite sect could be part of the new structure. Iran has refused to accept any preconditions.

Just how the invitation from the United Nations was fumbled is unclear, but it is unfortunate that some diplomatic solution could not have been found to include Iran, which along with Russia is Syria's main ally, providing President Assad with arms and other military support. In an interview with The New York Times and Time magazine last month, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said Iran would not be an impediment to a political settlement. "We have every interest in helping the process in a peaceful direction," he said. "We are satisfied, totally satisfied, convinced that there is no military solution in Syria and that there is a need to find a political solution in Syria."

The deaths of thousands of civilians have not persuaded Russia and Iran to break with Mr. Assad or at least pressure him to end the slaughter and cruelty against civilians. Iran might have ensured itself a seat at the peace conference if it had promised to suspend arms deliveries while negotiations were underway or persuaded Mr. Assad to call a cease-fire. And there are good reasons for Russia and Iran to play a constructive role. The civil war has drawn affiliates of Al Qaeda and other Sunni extremists to the Syrian battlefield, and these could eventually be a threat to Shiite-led Iran as well as Russia, which is fighting extremists in the Caucasus and worrying about attacks during the Winter Olympics in Sochi next month.

Mr. Zarif acknowledged this problem generally, asserting that "the continuation of this tragedy in Syria can only provide the best breeding ground for extremists who use this basically as a justification, as a recruiting climate, in order to wage the same type of activity in other parts of this region."

The peace conference is already providing a service by refocusing attention on the savagery of the war, now in its third year. On Monday, a team of legal and forensic experts commissioned by the government of Qatar, a main sponsor of the Syrian opposition, said that thousands of photographs — apparently smuggled out of Syria by a defecting military police

photographer — showed scarred, emaciated corpses that offered “direct evidence” of mass torture by Syrian government forces.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also accused opposition forces, as well as the government, of human rights abuses. In all, more than 100,000 Syrians are believed to have been killed in the war, many by government forces that have bombed cities and deprived civilians of food and other essential needs. It is well past time to say “enough” to more civilian deaths — and exactly the right time for a cease-fire and secure deliveries of humanitarian supplies.

[Article 2.](#)

NYT

WikiLeaks, Drought and Syria

Thomas L. Friedman

JAN. 21, 2014 -- In the 1970s, I got both my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in modern Middle East studies, and I can assure you that at no time did environmental or climate issues appear anywhere in the syllabi of my courses. Today, you can’t understand the Arab awakenings — or their solutions — without considering climate, environment and population stresses.

I’ve been reporting on the connection between the Syrian drought and the uprising there for a Showtime documentary that will air in April, but recently our researchers came across a WikiLeaks cable that brilliantly foreshadowed how environmental stresses would fuel the uprising. Sent on Nov. 8, 2008, from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus to the State Department, the cable details how, in light of what was a devastating Syrian drought — it lasted from 2006-10 — Syria’s U.N. food and agriculture representative, Abdullah bin Yehia, was seeking drought

assistance from the U.N. and wanted the U.S. to contribute. Here are some key lines:

- “The U.N. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs launched an appeal on September 29 requesting roughly \$20.23 million to assist an estimated one million people impacted by what the U.N. describes as the country’s worst drought in four decades.”
- “Yehia proposes to use money from the appeal to provide seed and technical assistance to 15,000 small-holding farmers in northeast Syria in an effort to preserve the social and economic fabric of this rural, agricultural community. If UNFAO efforts fail, Yehia predicts mass migration from the northeast, which could act as a multiplier on social and economic pressures already at play and undermine stability.”
- “Yehia does not believe that the [government of Bashar al-Assad] will allow any Syrian citizen to starve. ... However, Yehia told us that the Syrian minister of agriculture ... stated publicly that economic and social fallout from the drought was ‘beyond our capacity as a country to deal with.’ What the U.N. is trying to combat through this appeal, Yehia says, is the potential for ‘social destruction’ that would accompany erosion of the agricultural industry in rural Syria. This social destruction would lead to political instability.”
- “Without direct assistance, Yehia predicts that most of these 15,000 small-holding farmers would be forced to depart Al Hasakah Province to seek work in larger cities in western Syria. Approximately 100,000 dependents — women, children and the elderly or infirm — would be left behind to live in poverty, he said. Children would be likely to be pulled from school, he warned, in order to seek a source of income for families left behind. In addition, the migration of 15,000 unskilled laborers would add to the social and economic pressures presently at play in major Syrian cities. A system already burdened by a large Iraqi refugee population may not be able to absorb another influx of displaced persons, Yehia explained, particularly at this time of rising costs, growing dissatisfaction of the middle class, and a perceived weakening of the social fabric and security

structures that Syrians have come to expect and — in some cases — rely on.”

Yehia was prophetic. By 2010, roughly one million Syrian farmers, herders and their families were forced off the land into already overpopulated and underserved cities. These climate refugees were crowded together with one million Iraqi war refugees. The Assad regime failed to effectively help any of them, so when the Arab awakenings erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrian democrats followed suit and quickly found many willing recruits from all those dislocated by the drought.

But also consider this: Last May 9, The Times of Israel quoted Israeli geographer Arnon Soffer as observing that in the past 60 years, the population in the Middle East has twice doubled. “There is no example of this anywhere else on earth.”

And this: Last March, the International Journal of Climatology published a study, “Changes in extreme temperature and precipitation in the Arab region,” that found “consistent warming trends since the middle of the 20th century across the region,” manifested in “increasing frequencies of warm nights, fewer cool days and cool nights.”

And then consider this: Syria’s government couldn’t respond to a prolonged drought when there was a Syrian government. So imagine what could happen if Syria is faced by another drought after much of its infrastructure has been ravaged by civil war.

And, finally, consider this: “In the future, who will help a country like Syria when it gets devastated by its next drought if we are in a world where everyone is dealing with something like a Superstorm Sandy,” which alone cost the U.S. \$60 billion to clean up? asks Joe Romm, founder of ClimateProgress.org.

So to Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are funding the proxy war in Syria between Sunnis and Shiites/Alawites, all I can say is that you’re fighting for control of a potential human/ecological disaster zone. You need to be working together to rebuild Syria’s resiliency, and its commons, not

destroying it. I know that in saying this I am shouting into a dust storm. But there is nothing else worth saying.

[Article 3.](#)

The Washington Institute

Avoiding Assad's Forced Solution to the Syria Crisis

[Andrew J. Tabler](#)

January 21, 2014 -- The UN retraction of Iran's invitation to this week's Syria peace talks in Montreux, Switzerland, does little if anything to change the Assad regime's approach to those talks. President Bashar al-Assad's statements in recent days indicate that he and his backers are attempting to pressure the United States and the rest of the "London 11" countries supporting the opposition at the conference -- Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In particular, Damascus hopes to change the framework of the

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