

The Proxy 'Civil War' In Syria Is About Gas, Oil And Pipelines

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Present day Syria is a geopolitical construct arranged by the victors of the first world war at the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire.

In the midst of that war two Allied diplomats, the Frenchman François Georges-Picot and the Englishman Mark Sykes, secretly agreed on the post-war division of the Ottoman Empire into respective zones of influence: the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.

Initially the two territories were separated by a border which ran in an almost straight line from Jordan to Iran. However the discovery of oil in the region of Mosul just before the end of the war led to yet another negotiation with France in 1918 to cede that region to 'Zone B' - the English zone of influence. This border was later recognised internationally when Syria became a League of Nations mandate in 1920, and has not changed to date.

The only tenuous connection Australia had with the war in that part of the world, in addition to the slaughter at *Gelibolu* (Gallipoli) in April 1915, was the light horsemen 'epic' charge at Beersheba in October-November 1917. The beneficiary would then be the British Empire.

Australia would recently return to the Middle East with similar charges in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2001 and 2003 the beneficiary would be the American Empire, rapt into a renewal of the 'Great Game'.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire led to the proclamation of an Arab kingdom of Syria in 1920, the setting up of a republic by merging the states of Alawites, Jabal al-Druze and Syria in 1930, and the assignment of the new entity as a French mandate. It gained independence from France on 17 April 1946. It was organised as a parliamentary republic - albeit of a special type.

The Euphrates, Syria's most important river, crosses the country in the east. The country is considered to be one of the fifteen states which comprise the so-called 'Cradle of civilisation'.

Before the explosion of the present conflict, the Syrian population was estimated at 22 and one half million, living on an area of 185,180 square kilometres.

The position of the country is of strategic importance, bound by some 193 kilometres of Mediterranean coast, 375 kilometres of border with Lebanon to the west, 822 kilometres with Turkey to the north, 605 kilometres with Iraq to the east, 375 kilometres with Jordan to the south, and 76 kilometres with Israel to the south-west. Syria is a country of fertile plains, high mountains and deserts; it is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, Turks, Christian, Druze, Alawite Shias and Arab Sunnis. The latter make up the majority of the population.

Its ethnic origin is around 74 per cent Sunni Muslim, 10 per cent Christian, with the other 16 per cent split among various other kinds of Islam, in particular Alawite - around 12 per cent, and Druze around 3 per cent. The present ruler and his family, the al-Assads, are Alawite - an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, and derive much of their support from the Alawite minority which became very rich through corruption and 'strong arm' style business operations and which, of course, even has its own militia called the *shihabba*; it is responsible for enforcing the al-Assads' rule and the ethnic cleansing of the Sunni Muslim population in Syria which has been going on since 1974.

The post-independence period was tumultuous, and a large number of military *coups* and *coup*-attempts shook the country in the period 1949 to 1971.

In November 1956, as a direct result of the [Suez Crisis](#), Syria signed a pact with the [Soviet Union](#). This gave a foothold for Communist influence within the government in exchange for military equipment. [Turkey](#) then became worried about this increase in the strength of Syrian military technology, as it seemed feasible that Syria might attempt to retake [Iskenderun](#) - sometimes called Scanderoon or Scandaroon, a city and district in the province of Hatay on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. Only heated debates in the United Nations lessened the threat of war.

In the twenty four years between independence and Hafez al-Assad's takeover in 1970, there were seven military *coups* - including al-Assad's *coup* when he slit the throats of the children of the president's family, and a three-year period - 1958 to 1961 - in which Syria merged with Egypt to form the 'United Arab Republic'.

The union with Egypt was terminated by another *coup* by the al-Assad family. Syria remained under emergency law from 1963 to 2011, a measure justified by the government in light of the continuing war with Israel over the Golan Heights. This long period of emergency effectively suspended most constitutional protections for citizens, and - as a result - the Syrian system of government is considered to be non-democratic, at least by 'western' standards.

Hafez al-Assad, an air force general turned politician who had been prime minister from 1970 to 1971, was elected president in 1971 and held that position until his death in June 2000. He was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad.

The al-Assad family is very wealthy - with estimated value of 2 billion dollars. Most of al-Assad's generals and cabinet ministers are his relatives or come from the Alawite minority. Sunni Muslims are not allowed to participate in government. Only members of the Ba'ath party - the same party as was Saddam Hussein's - are. This situation is often referred to as one of the causes of the present unrest. The struggle is portrayed as being in substance an attempt to turn a dictatorship into a democracy.

In a major shift in relations with both other [Arab states](#) and the 'western' world, Syria participated in the United States-led [Gulf war](#) against Saddam Hussein, participated in the multilateral [Madrid Conference of 1991](#), and during the 1990s engaged in negotiations with Israel. These negotiations failed, and there have been no further direct Syrian-Israeli talks since President [Hafez al-Assad](#)'s meeting with then President [Bill Clinton](#) in Geneva in March 2000.

After Hafez al-Assad's death, his son Bashar al-Assad was elected president in [an election](#) in which he ran unopposed. His election saw the birth of the '[Damascus Spring](#)' and hopes of reform, but by autumn 2001 the government had suppressed the movement, imprisoning some of its leading intellectuals. Instead, change was limited to some market reforms.

On 5 October 2003 Israel [bombed a site near Damascus](#), claiming it was a terrorist training facility for members of [Islamic Jihad](#). In March 2004 Syrian Kurds and Arabs [clashed](#) in the north-eastern city of al-Qamishli. Signs of rioting were seen in the towns of Qameshli and Hassakeh. In 2005 Syria ended its occupation of Lebanon. On 6 September 2007 Israeli jet fighters carried out '[Operation Orchard](#)' against a suspected [nuclear reactor](#) under construction by [North Korean](#) technicians.

Since March 2011 Syria has been embroiled in 'civil war' in the wake of uprisings - considered an extension of the Arab Spring, the mass movement of revolutions and protests in the Arab world - against al-Assad and the neo-Ba'athist government.

In July 2011 army defectors declared the formation of the '[Free Syrian Army](#)' and began forming fighting units. The opposition is dominated by [Sunni](#) Muslims, whereas the leading government figures are Alawites. In addition to the 'Free Syrian Army' - which is largely secular and non-sectarian - there are the moderate Islamists of the 'Syrian Liberation Front', the Salafist Islamists of the 'Syrian Islamic Front', and the *al-Qaeda* affiliates of *Jabhat al-Nusra*. There are also a number of Kurdish resistance groups involved. An alternative government was formed by the opposition umbrella group, the 'Syria National Coalition', in March 2012. Representatives of this government were subsequently invited to take up Syria's seat at the Arab League. The opposition coalition has been recognised as the "sole representative of the Syrian people" by several nations, including the United Kingdom, the United States and France.

According to various sources, including the United Nations, over 100,000 people have been killed. To escape the violence, by early September 2013 over 2 million [Syrian refugees](#) have fled to neighbouring countries of Iraq, [Jordan](#), [Lebanon](#) and Turkey. An imaginary line from north-west to south-east divides the country into two parts. The part close to Turkey is occupied by 'the rebels', some of whom hold small area controlled by Kurds. As the civil war has dragged on, there have been worries that the country could become fragmented and cease to function as a state.

The condition for human rights in Syria has long been a significant concern among independent organisations such as [Human Rights Watch](#), which in 2010 referred to the country's record as "among the worst in the world." [Freedom House](#) ranked Syria "Not free" in its annual [Freedom in the world](#) survey.

The Damascus government is accused of arresting democracy and human rights activists, [censoring](#) websites and imposing travel bans. [Arbitrary detention](#), [torture](#) and disappearances are widespread. Despite the fact that Syria's constitution guarantees gender equality, critics say that personal statutes laws and the criminal code discriminate against girls and women. Still there is no provision against so-called '[honour killing](#)'. As of 9 November 2011, during the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, the United Nations reported that of the over 3,500 total deaths, more than 250 deaths were children as young as 2 years old, and that boys as young as 11 years old have been gang raped by security services officers. [People opposing President al-Assad's rule](#) claim that more than 200, mostly civilians, were massacred and about 300 injured in Hama in shelling by the government forces on 12 July 2012.

Because of the ongoing 'civil war' since 2011, and associated killings and human rights abuses, Syria has been increasingly isolated from the countries in the region, and the wider international community. Diplomatic relations have been severed with several countries, including Belgium, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, the United States, and - most importantly - the Gulf States.

In August 2013 the al-Assad government was accused of using chemical weapons against its civilians. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said it was "undeniable" that chemical weapons had been used in the country and that President Bashar al-Assad's forces had committed a "moral obscenity" against his own people. "Make no mistake," Kerry said. "President Obama believes there must be accountability for those who would use the world's most heinous weapon against the world's most vulnerable people. Nothing today is more serious, and nothing is receiving more serious scrutiny."

The matter has now reached an impasse: the United Nations has investigated, reported that sarin gas was used, by whom it is yet unknown.

The economy has suffered, of course. Syria is classified by the [World Bank](#) as a 'lower middle income country.' It remains dependent on the oil and agriculture sectors. The oil sector usually provided about 40 per cent of export earnings. The agriculture sector would contribute to about 20 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product and 20 per cent of employment. Oil reserves are expected to decrease in the coming years and Syria has already become a net oil importer. Since the 'civil war' began, the economy shrunk by 35 per cent,

and the [Syrian pound](#) has fallen to one-sixth of its prewar value. The government increasingly relies on credit from Iran, China and Russia.

Syria's share in global exports has decreased significantly since 2001. The real *per capita* G.D.P. growth was just 2.5 per cent per year in the 2000-2008 period. Unemployment is high at above 10 per cent. Poverty rates have increased from 11 per cent in 2004 to 12.3 per cent in 2007.

Prior to the 'civil war' the government hoped to attract new investment in the tourism, natural gas, and service sectors to diversify its economy and reduce its dependence on oil and agriculture. The government began to institute economic reforms aimed at liberalising most markets, but those reforms were slow and *ad hoc*, and have been completely reversed since the outbreak of conflict in 2011.

As at 2012 Syria's oil and tourism industries in particular have been devastated, with US\$ 5 billion lost to the conflict. Reconstruction needed due to the ongoing 'civil war' will cost as much as US\$ 10 billion. Sanctions have sapped the government's finance. United States and European Union bans on oil imports, which went into effect in 2012, are estimated to cost Syria about US\$ 400 million a month.

Syria has produced heavy-grade oil from fields located in the northeast since the late 1960s. In the early 1980s, light-grade, low-sulphur oil was discovered near [Deir ez-Zor](#) in eastern Syria. Syria's rate of oil production has decreased dramatically from a peak close to 600,000 barrels per day - the equivalent of 95,000 cubic metres per day - in 1995 down to less than 140,000 barrels per day in 2012.

Syria exported roughly 200,000 barrels per day in 2005, and oil still accounts for a majority of the country's export income. It also produced 22 million cubic metres of gas per day, with estimated reserves around 8.5 trillion cubic feet. While the government has attempted to work with international energy companies in the hope of eventually becoming a gas exporter, all gas currently produced is consumed domestically.

Prior to the uprising, more than 90 per cent of Syrian oil exports were to European Union countries, with the remainder going to Turkey. Oil and gas revenues constituted around 20 per cent of total G.D.P. and 25 per cent of total government revenue.

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The real reason for the conflict in Syria is oil. Oil was at the basis of the United States interest in western and central Asia, beginning with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

When the United States decided to invade Afghanistan, ostensibly to capture Osama bin Laden - and failed, but stayed on like an unwanted guest - could it have known that the Afghans were sitting on some of the world's greatest reserves of mineral wealth ? The answer is a resounding yes.

Russ Baker, an investigative journalist, raised the preceding question some time ago, noting the dubious 2010 claim, published by *The New York Times*, that “the vast scale of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth was [recently] discovered by a small team of Pentagon officials and American geologists.”

Everyone but the poorly informed ‘western’ public knew for a long time, and long before the 2001 invasion, that Afghanistan was a treasure trove.

The pretence of a ‘recent discovery’ serves only to justify remaining in Afghanistan now, despite the fact that the war has been declared won and over, and that the bulk of the troops is leaving. In Afghanistan, in Iraq as elsewhere imperial-style resource conquest is the real motive of foreign policy and wars.

One should keep in mind the quote from Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006: “I’m saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil.”

Interest in Syria may be different from oil extraction, but it is fundamentally connected with oil transport.

And why Syria ?

In a book on *Winning modern wars*, dedicated not exclusively to ‘Iraq, Terrorism, and the American Empire’, as the sub-title reads, and published in 2003, General Wesley K. Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of the N.A.T.O. forces between 1997 and 2000, wrote that “even though there was no evidence of Iraqi sponsorship of 9/11 whatsoever” the

opportunity presented itself “to roll it all up.” War to unseat Saddam Hussein promised concrete, visible action. If any terrorists still thought that Americans were soft and reluctant to strike back, well, this would be the convincing blow. Success against Iraq weakened by a decade of crippling economic sanctions seemed virtually guaranteed. And with the use of force in Iraq would come other opportunities such as breaking out of the decade-old “dual containment” policy in the Persian Gulf: *pressuring other states in the region; and dealing with potential challenges to U.S. regional dominance in the oil-rich Persian Gulf* before any significant threat to U.S. actions could arise.” [Emphasis added]

And Gen. Clark continued: “As I went back through the Pentagon in November 2001, one of the senior military staff officers had time for a chat. Yes, we were still on track for going against Iraq, he said. But there was more. So, I thought, this is what they mean when they talk about “draining the swamp.” It was further evidence of the Cold War approach: Terrorism must have a “state sponsor,” and it would be much more effective to attack a state - with complete confidence that it can be taken down - than to chase after individuals, nebulous organizations, and shadow associations.” (at 129-130).

Nobody, most likely, paid any real attention at what Gen. Clark was writing and meaning. So he returned to the subject in a stunning but little-known speech on 3 October 2007. Gen. Clark claimed that America underwent a ‘policy coup’ at the time of the 11 September 2001 attacks. In that speech Clark revealed that, right after 9/11, he was privy to information contained in a classified memorandum: the United States’ plans to attack and ‘remove’ governments in seven countries over five years.

After recounting how a Pentagon source had told him weeks after 9/11 of the Pentagon’s plan to attack Iraq notwithstanding its non-involvement in 9/11, this is how Clark described the aspirations of the ‘coup’ being plotted by Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and what he called “a half dozen other collaborators from the *Project for the New American Century*”: “Six weeks later, I saw the same officer, and asked: ‘Why haven’t we attacked Iraq? Are we still going to attack Iraq?’

He said: ‘Sir, it’s worse than that.’ He said - he pulled up a piece of paper off his desk: ‘I just got this memo from the Secretary of Defense’s office. It says we’re going to attack and destroy the governments in 7 countries in five years - we’re going to start with Iraq, and then we’re going to move to *Syria*, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran’.” [Emphasis

added] Lebanon has been subdued - for the moment, at least. And so is Somalia. Sudan has split and has its problems. Iraq has been devastated, but its oil seems to be under control. Iran alone is left but, if the assault on Syria were to succeed it would be next in line to be “taken out” - the last in “the swamp” to be drained.

Clark said the aim of the plot was this: “They wanted us to destabilize the Middle East, turn it upside down, make it under our control.” He then recounted a conversation he had had ten years earlier with Paul Wolfowitz - back in 1991 - in which the then-number-3-Pentagon-official, after criticising Bush the father for not toppling Saddam, told Clark: “But one thing we did learn [from the Persian Gulf war] is that we can use our military in the region - in the Middle East - and the Soviets won’t stop us. And we’ve got about 5 or 10 years to clean up those old Soviet regimes - Syria, Iran [*sic*], Iraq - before the next great superpower comes on to challenge us.” [Emphasis added]

Clark said he was shocked by Wolfowitz’s desires because, as Clark put it: “the purpose of the military is to start wars and change governments ? It’s not to deter conflicts ?”

The current turmoil in the Middle East may appear to be driven largely by popular revolts, and not by *neocoon* shenanigans. Still, in the aftermath of military-caused regime change in Iraq and Libya, with concerted ‘regime change’ efforts now underway aimed at Syria and Iran, with active and escalating proxy fighting in Somalia, with a modest military deployment to South Sudan, and the active use of drones in six different Muslim countries, it is worth asking whether the *neocoon* dream as laid out by Clark is dead or is being actively pursued and fulfilled, albeit with means more subtle and multilateral than full-on military invasions.

One should, further, never forget that the majority of the 9/11 hijackers originated in that hardly reliable U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia, a country controlled by the Saudi royal family, which itself needs constant external war and strife throughout the Middle East to keep its subjects from focusing on its own despotism and staggering corruption, and to maintain its position as an indispensable ally of ‘the West’ in these wars. It was the actions of the Saudi-dominated 9/11 hijackers and their Saudi sponsor, Osama bin Laden, which created the justification for this endless series of resource wars.

But the real reason for the present assault on Syria is to be found in the ‘safe’ flow of oil, and gas, and through safe pipelines.

* * *

In a rerun of the first 'Great Game' - the nineteenth century imperial rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia - players once again positioned themselves to control the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Today, the United States has taken over the leading role from the British. Along with the Russians, new regional powers, such as China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, have entered the arena, and transnational oil corporations are also pursuing their own interests.

The main spoils in today's 'Great Game' are Caspian oil and gas. On its shores, and at the bottom of the Caspian Sea, according to estimates obtained at least twelve years ago, lie the world's biggest untapped fossil fuel resources. Estimates range from 110 to 243 billion barrels of crude, worth up to US\$ 4 trillion. According to the United States Department of Energy, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan alone could sit on more than 130 billion barrels - more than three times the United States reserves. Oil giants such as British Petroleum, ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil have already invested more than US\$ 30 billion in new production facilities.

With a potential oil production of up to 6 million barrels per day by 2015, the Caspian region has become crucial to the U.S. policy of 'diversifying energy supply'. It is designed to wean the United States off its dependence on the Arab-dominated Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, the O.P.E.C. cartel, which is using its near-monopoly position as pawn and leverage against industrialised countries. As global oil consumption keeps surging and many oil wells outside the Middle East are nearing depletion, O.P.E.C is expanding its share of the world market. At the same time, the United States will have to import more than two-thirds of its total energy demand by 2020, mostly from the Middle East.

It is understandable that an American administration other than that of the Bushes, particularly the second one, would feel quite uncomfortable with the growing power of, and American dependence on, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a theocratic monarchy which recognises no distinction within its rule between politics and religion. It adheres to an extremely conservative and paranoid version of Islam known as *Wahabism*, which it tries to promote throughout the world. The United States knows this, and so - it seems, no more - does Australia. But people 'downstairs' are not supposed, and certainly not allowed, to question what people 'upstairs' do. And recent Australian governments have continued to

pretend that nothing happens. The American government, of course, is concerned, and continuously fears that radical Islamist groups could topple the corrupt *Sa'ud* dynasty and stop the flow of oil to 'infidels'. Responsible administrators in Washington realise that, to stave off political turmoil, the regime in Riyadh funds the radical Islamic *Wahabi* sect which foments terror against Americans around the world. In a desperate effort to decrease its dependence on Saudi oil sheiks, the United States seeks to control the Caspian oil resources. The situation is complicated by other rivalries. However, fierce conflicts have broken out over pipeline routes. Russia, still regarding itself as imperial overlord of former components of its Union, promotes pipeline routes across its territory, including Chechnya, in the north Caucasus. China, the increasingly oil-dependent waking giant in the region, wants to build eastbound pipelines from Kazakhstan. Iran is offering its pipeline network via the Persian Gulf.

The 'war on terror' is being used as an excuse to further United States energy interests in the Caspian; client-states like Australia simply follow.

This is the theatre in which the drama over oil and gas is being played in the Central Asian Region and in the entire Middle East.

If one were to ask Alan Greenspan, Senator John McCain, former president George W. Bush, former Vice-President Dick Cheney - and assuming that the latter two would tell the truth - one would see that in May 2001 Cheney recommended in the national energy policy report that "the president makes energy security a priority of our trade and foreign policy", singling out the Caspian basin as a "rapidly growing new area of supply." Aspiring vice-president Sarah Palin, some high-level National Security Council officers and many, many others, could confirm that the Afghanistan war was planned well before 11 September 2001 and was for oil - and gas, too. Surviving Taliban could witness to that: the United States threateningly told them that they would either get "a carpet of gold or a carpet of bombs", the former if they green-lighted a pipeline, the second if they did not.

A well-known *neocoon*, John Bolton, spoke two years ago about: "The critical oil and natural gas producing region that we fought so many wars to try and protect our economy from the adverse impact of losing that supply or having it available only at very high prices."

The pipeline that the United States wanted to run through Afghanistan prior to 9/11 was to transport [gas as much as oil](#).

The proposed US\$ 7.6 billion, 1,040 mile-/1,674 kilometre-long Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, TAPI natural gas pipeline has a long regional history, having first been proposed even before the Taliban captured Kabul, when in 1995 Turkmenistan and Pakistan initialled a memorandum of understanding. TAPI, with a carrying capacity of 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas a year, was projected to run from Turkmenistan's Dauletabad gas field across Afghanistan and Pakistan and terminate at the north-western Indian town of Fazilka.

TAPI would have required the assent of the Taliban, and two years after the memorandum of understanding was signed, the Central Asia Gas Pipeline Ltd. consortium, led by U.S. company Unocal, flew a Taliban delegation to Unocal headquarters in Houston, where the Taliban signed off on the project.

The Taliban visit to the United States had been [confirmed](#) by the mainstream media.

Unocal, the leader of the consortium and [Enron](#), with full U.S. government support, continued to woo the Taliban right up until 2001 in an attempt to sweet-talk them into green-lighting the pipeline.

There is documentation un-controversially proving that until August 2001, the United States government saw the Taliban regime "as a source of stability in Central Asia that would enable the construction of an oil pipeline across Central Asia" from the rich oilfields in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, through Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the Indian Ocean. Until then "the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia [had] been controlled by Russia. The Bush government wanted to change all that."

Under newly elected President George W. Bush, Unocal went back into the game and, as early as January 2001, was snuggled up warm and comfortable to the Taliban yet again, this time supported by a star-studded governmental cast of characters, including undersecretary of state Richard Armitage, himself a former Unocal lobbyist.

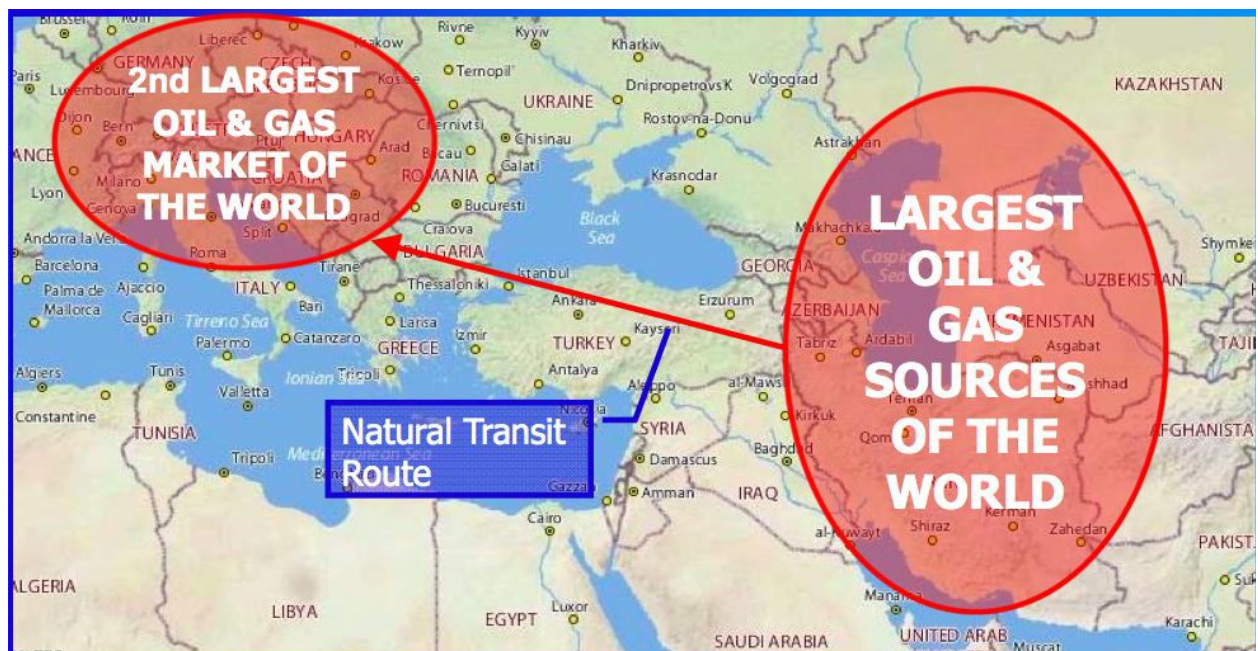
Negotiations eventually broke down because of the very high transit fees the Taliban demanded. At a Group of Eight summit meeting in Genova in July 2001, 'western'

diplomats indicated that the Bush administration had decided to take the Taliban down before year's end. A Pakistani diplomat in Islamabad would later confirm this. The attacks of 11 September 2001 just slightly accelerated the programme.

Soon after the start of the Afghan war, Hamid Karzai, a Unocal consultant, was installed as Kabul deputy sheriff. Just a year later, a U.S.-friendly Afghani regime [signed onto TAPI](#).

India just [formally signed on to TAPI](#). This ended the long-proposed competitor: an [Iran-Pakistan-India](#) (IPI) pipeline.

The intention of the consortium and of its protecting governments was that of transforming the Middle East into a reticulation of pipelines - something better illustrated by the following drawings:





And here are the competing pipelines supported by the United States and by Iran, before India sided with the United States:

Two Proposed Pipelines in South Asia



What was happening was part of the great geopolitical battle raging between the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and Russia, China and Iran, on the other hand.

Iran and Pakistan are still discussing a pipeline without India, and [Russia supports the proposal as well](#).

Indeed, the 'Great Game' being played right now by the world powers largely boils down to the United States and Russia [fighting for control over Eurasian oil and gas resources](#).

Russia and the United States have been in a state of competition in this region ever since the Soviet Union was dissolved, and Russia is adamant on keeping the Americans out of its Central Asian backyard. Russia aims to increase European gas dominance on its resources whereas the United States wants the European Union to diversify its energy supply, primarily away from Russian dominance. Already three major Russian pipelines are supplying energy to Europe, and Russia has planned two new pipelines.

The situation is now complicated by the emergence of China. The third 'big player' in this 'New Great Game', China, the emerging colossal power of the Asian Century, is soon to be the world's biggest energy consumer, which is already importing gas from Turkmenistan through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to its Xinjiang province. This is done by the Central Asia-China pipeline, which may tilt the balance towards Asia. China's need for energy is projected to increase by 150 per cent, which explains why it has signed probably the largest number of deals not just with the Central Asian republics but also with the heavily sanctioned Iran and even Afghanistan. China has planned around five west-east gas pipelines, within China, of which one is operational - domestically from Xinjiang to Shanghai - and others are under construction and will be connected to Central Asian gas reserves.

China is also pushing for an alternative to TAPI: a [Turkmenistan-Afghan-China](#) pipeline.

Another important country is Iran. Iran sits on the second largest gas reserves in the world and had over 93 billion barrels of proven oil reserves with a total of 4.17 million barrels per day in 2009. To the dislike of the United States, Iran is a very active player. The Turkmenistan-Iran gas pipeline, constructed in 1997, was the first new pipeline going out from Central Asia. Furthermore, Iran signed a US\$ 120 billion gas exploration deal, often termed the 'deal of the century' with China. This gas deal signed in 2004 covers the annual

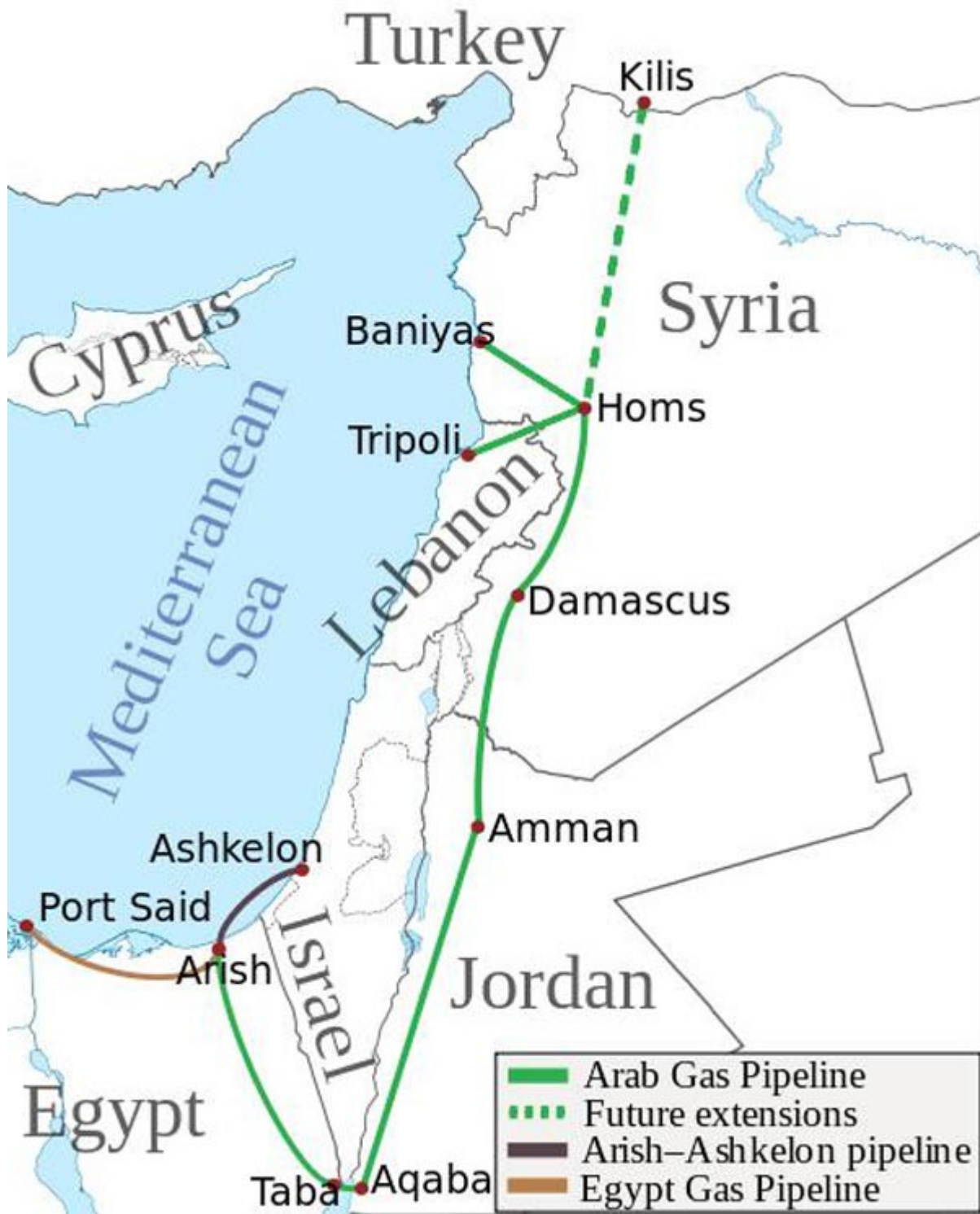
export to China for 25 years of approximately 10 million tons of Iranian liquefied natural gas. It also gives China's state oil company the right to participate in such projects as exploration and drilling for petrochemical and gas industries in Iran. Iran also plans to sell its gas to Europe through its Persian Gas pipeline which can become a rival to the U.S. *Nabucco* pipeline - about which more thereafter. More importantly, it is also the key party in the proposed Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline, also formerly known as the 'peace pipeline.' Under this pipeline plan, first proposed in 1995, Iran will sell gas from its mega South Pars fields to Pakistan and India.

China's support for Iran is [largely explained by oil and gas](#).

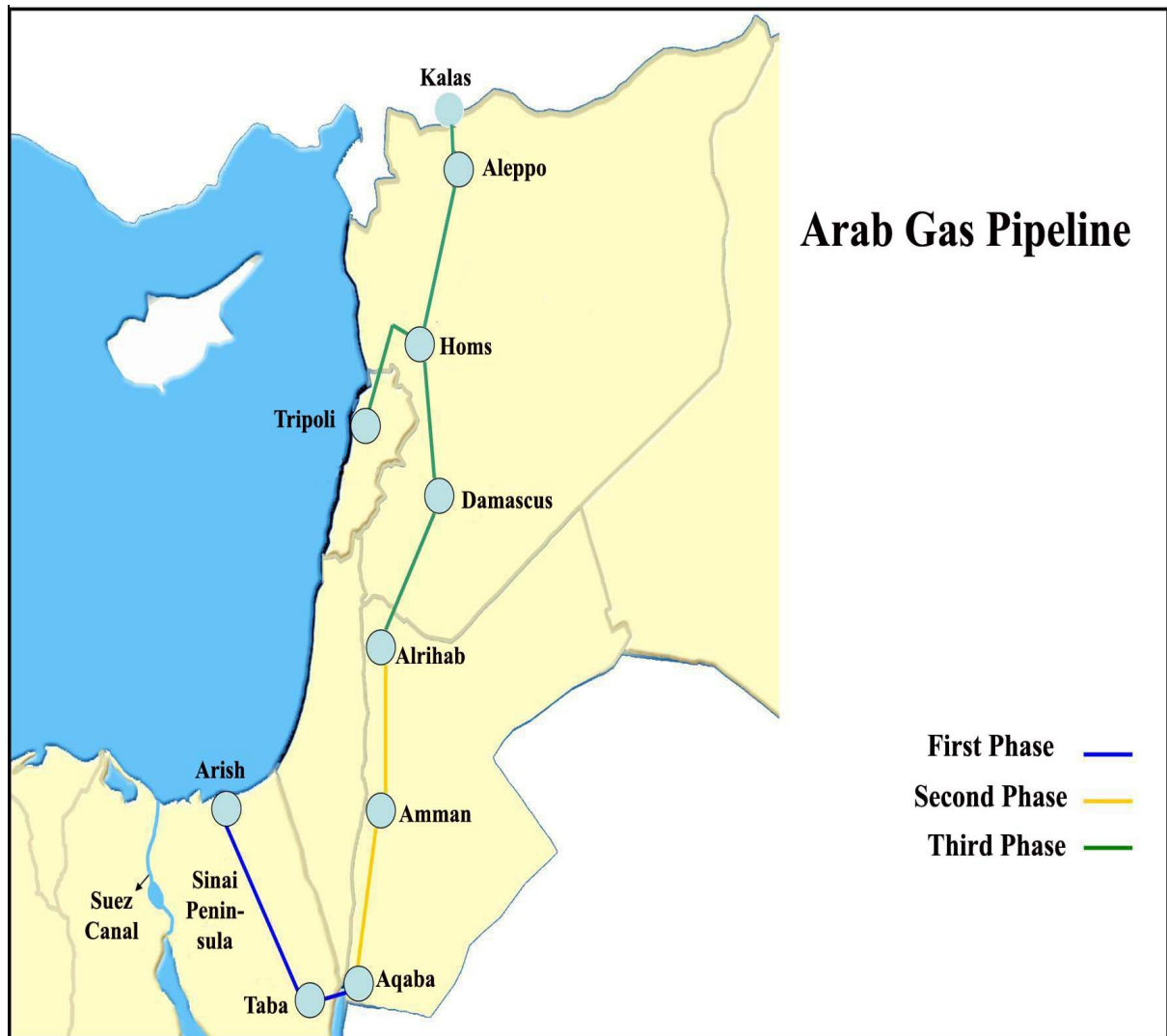
'Isolated' Iran happens to be a supreme matter of national security for China, which has already rejected the latest American sanctions without a blink and China may be the true winner from America's new sanctions, because it is likely to purchase its oil and gas at a lower price, as the Iranians grow ever more dependent on the China market.

China has also shown interest in the construction of the Iran-Pakistan on the Pakistani side and further expanding it to China. This means that starting at Gwadar, Beijing plans to build another pipeline, crossing Baluchistan and then following the Karakoram Highway northwards all the way to Xinjiang, China's far western area. China is also most likely to gain the construction contract for this pipeline. Chinese firms are part of the consortium awarded the contract for the financial consultancy for the project. Closer participation in the Asian energy projects would also help China increase its influence in the region for its objective of creating a 'string of pearls' across the region, which has often frightened India as an encirclement strategy by the Chinese government.

It is interesting that one of the seven countries the government of which the *neoccons* planned to destroy is Syria. And the reason ? Syria figured in the scheme of things as one of the places touched by the proposed 1,200 kilometres Arab Gas Pipeline, as can be seen in the following drawing:



Syria was to have become integral part of a combination which would see a pipeline from Kilis (or Kalas) in Turkey and down ‘behind’ Lebanon and Israel, as it were, and finally to Aqaba on the Persian Gulf, and from there to Taba and Arish.




The pipeline would be built in three phases: first from Arish to Taba and Aqaba, then from Aqaba to Alrihab in Jordan, and finally from Alrihab to Kalas (or Kilis) in Turkey.

This is the present situation:

syria 1 of

ARAB GAS PIPELINE PROJECT



TECHNICAL FEATURES	
Total Length :	1200 Km
Pipeline Dia. :	36 Inch
Max. Capacity :	10 bcma

- THE EGYPTIAN GAS IS CURRENTLY BEING SUPPLIED TO SYRIA
- THE NETWORK OF TURKEY AND SYRIA WILL BE LINKED WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF REMAINING 230 KM.
- FURTHER GAS SUPPLIES MUST BE SECURED BEFORE PROCEEDING WITH SYRIA – TURKEY INTERCONNECTOR

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It is all too clear, then, that the present ‘civil war’ in Syria is a misnomer. The war is from the outside, and attacking Syria was intended some twenty years ago to weaken its close allies: [Iran](#) and [Russia](#) - and indirectly [China](#). Syria’s central role in the Arab gas pipeline is also a key to why it is now being targeted.

Just as the Taliban was scheduled for removal after they demanded too much in return for the Unocal pipeline, Syria’s al-Assad was targeted because he is not a reliable ‘player.’

It is in the interest of the United States, Israel and Turkey - despite their apparent differences - that there be guaranteed flow of oil through a Syria in which there is a compliant regime, in other words a client-state.

IP - Iran-Pakistan is the original US\$ 7 billion IPI - Iran-Pakistan-India, also known as the ‘peace pipeline’. India parted company in 2009 after non-stop harassment by the Bush and then the Obama administrations. India, meanwhile, was offered access to civilian nuclear technology. Australia has recently promised to supply uranium.

China, for its part, is still eyeing the possibility of extending IP out of Gwadar port, then crossing to Pakistan's north alongside the Karakoram Highway all the way to Xinjiang. China is already helping Pakistan to build civilian nuclear reactors - as part of Pakistan's energy security policy.

The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Ltd., I.C.B.C., China's largest bank and the world's number one lender, was already positioned as financial adviser to IP. But then, contemplating the (sanctions) writing on the wall, it started to show less interest, at least as Pakistan saw the position. Yet, according to a Pakistani Ministry of Petroleum's spokesperson, "ICBC is still engaged in the IP project and the negotiations are still going on."

A huge bank such as I.C.B.C. may be wary of defying the American sanction efforts; but other financing options may be found, as in other banks or government-level agreements with China or Russia. Pakistan's Foreign Minister has just made it very clear. Pakistan badly needs oil which should start flowing by December 2014.

Pakistan and Iran have already agreed on pricing. Iran's 900-kilometres stretch of IP is already built; Pakistan's has begun.

For the United States the only alternative possibility is the construction of the long-delayed TAPI - Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India. Even assuming it will find financing; even assuming that the Taliban will content themselves with an 'acceptable' share of the profits - the point over which negotiations with the Clinton then Bush administrations failed, and even assuming it would not be bombed routinely by *mujahideen* or other groups in a likely civil war, TAPI would only be ready, at the very best, by 2018.

On 11 December 2010 a preliminary agreement was signed in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat, by representatives of the TAPI four countries to proceed with plans for the United States and, *semble*, Israeli-supported pipeline. The TAPI pipeline was planned to be built along the Herat-Kandahar highway across western and southern Afghanistan. Construction of the pipeline was to have been completed by 2014.

A 1,680 kilometre pipeline was to supply 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day. Much of this gas was to come from Israeli-owned gas fields in Turkmenistan. The Obama Administration, elected on the promise to withdraw U.S. troops by July 2011, now says that the United States will maintain combat troops in Afghanistan beyond December 2014.

In the long terms, the construction of TAPI is regarded as essential for Europe to diversify its energy supplies and reduce its dependence on oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf and Russia. Failure in Afghanistan, and by extension in Pakistan, would mean abandoning the construction of TAPI and in turn, pave the way for Russia to reassert its former hegemony in the region.

Should this happen, European dependence on Russian-controlled energy supplies would increase hugely, giving Russia unprecedented leverage over Europe, both economically and politically. A Russia-dependent Europe would damage the transatlantic relationship beyond repair, wean the Europeans away from their former American partner, and split ‘the West’ into two.

On the other hand, should ‘the mission’ in Afghanistan succeed and TAPI be built, Europe could continue to deepen its economic and political ties with Russia without running the risk of falling hostage to Russia’s geostrategic ambitions - which are still very much alive; it would allow Europe progressively to integrate Russia into a united West.

* * *

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration in 2010, before the ‘civil war’ drove down oil production, Syria was the 34th largest oil producer in the world - behind Thailand, but just ahead of Vietnam. [Syria’s oil production of 367,100 barrels per day](#) represented about one half of one percent of world oil production - small in the overall picture. But it is more instructive to see what Syria’s neighbours produce.

Oil producers in [Syria’s neighbourhood](#) ranked against all other countries in the world as at 2012 are as follows: Saudi Arabia (2nd, behind Russia), Iran (5th), Iraq (7th), Kuwait (8th), Egypt (25th), Turkey (54th), Israel (95th), and Jordan (96th). Slightly farther away are the United Arab Emirates (8th) and Qatar (19th). Turkey is more important than it seems because two major oil pipelines run through the country, [one originating in Azerbaijan](#) and [the other originating in Iraq, that country’s largest crude oil export line](#).

The notion that Syria’s neighbours hold the keys to a lot of oil certainly comes somewhat as a surprise to anyone with a modest knowledge of the Middle East. But, what really matters

about the Syrian conflict is that it is a 'civil war'. One may well ask, why is an American president so concerned about a war within that country ?

That question leads to a second and even more salient observation. [This 'civil war' has now become a proxy for the Shia-Sunni split in the Muslim faith](#), with attending aspects of a non-religious source, a circumstance which has caused violence between the two groups for decades.

The split is not just between countries which are predominantly Shia and others predominately Sunni. It is, as Syria is showing, a split within many Arab nations which have subjects of both sects. So, there is not only the potential for conflict between nations in the Middle East, but also for the spread of civil unrest and civil war to other nations in the region. Iraq continues to demonstrate that this fear is not just hypothetical as [bombings perpetrated in the name of minority Sunnis continue](#) to vex a country which has experienced a long conflict between Shia and Sunni after the U.S. invasion.

That so far the 'civil war' has not expanded to a war between neighbours is due to many factors, including pressure from powerful members of the United States Congress not to engage in full fledged military assault on Syria. Even the [British Parliament rejected a call from Prime Minister David Cameron](#) to join any U.S. military action in Syria. For obvious reasons, Americans are wary of involvement in yet another war in the Middle East. It is hard to explain, why President Obama - [the same one who opposed the Iraq war when he was a state senator in Illinois](#) - would draw up plans for a military strike against Syria.

The ostensible reason is the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian military. President Obama called this heinous act [a violation of "international norms."](#) But in a war which has [already taken more than 100,000 lives](#) would "international norms" have been better observed if Syrian soldiers had simply gunned down everyone instead ?

Unless the charge that the Syrian government used of chemical weapons can be substantiated, it is most likely a pretext for American intervention despite all the importance given to the famous, but rather vaguely worded 'red line' traced by President Obama, and his subsequent [warning about chemical weapons to Syria last year.](#)

Every war needs a pretext; by definition it provides and builds up the *casus belli*, the incident which may justify or allegedly justifies a war or conflict.

That pretext was arranged on 21 August 2013. On that day, some 1,300 inhabitants of the Ghouta suburbs - and the figure varies between 355 and 1,729, near Damascus - fell victims of a chemical weapons bombardment. The Syrian government and 'the rebels' have blamed each other for the attack. Some sources reported that none of the victims they saw displayed physical wounds. If the death toll is confirmed, the incident would be the deadliest use of chemical weapons since the Iran-Iraq war.

The attack occurred a few kilometres from the temporary quarters of United Nations investigators who had just arrived at the Syrian government's invitation to investigate several previous alleged uses of chemical weapons. The U.N. urged an immediate investigation of any use of chemical weapons and to be allowed immediate access to the site of the attack, requesting from 22-24 August to visit Ghouta. On 23 August government and rebel forces clashed in Ghouta, while the U.N. called for a ceasefire. On the same day the Syrian military continued to shell Ghouta. On 24 August U.N. officials arrived in Damascus and negotiated access for their inspectors, the Syrian government consenting to access the next day. Inspectors worked from August 26 to 31 investigating sites of the attacks.

Russia and Iran have stated that the opposition to Syria President Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the attacks, while the European Union, the Arab League, along with the United States and nine other countries, have stated that the Syrian government was responsible for the incident, whether or not President al-Assad personally ordered the attack.

The latest episode is merely one more event in a conflict which has increasingly taken on [genocidal](#) aspects, as repeatedly pointed out by Genocide Watch. Genocide Watch is the Coordinator of the International Alliance to End Genocide; it is based in Washington, D.C. In a recent update of 26 April 2013 the organisation warned that massacres and mass atrocities against "pro-democracy protesters and the civilian population are being committed by Syrian security forces under the command of the al-Assad government. Protests turned violent as former Syrian troops defected and formed the 'Free Syrian Army,' that the Syrian government continues to call a "terrorist" organization to justify its all out war against the rebels and Sunni Muslim civilians. What began as the violent repression of civilian protests has escalated to a civil war. Whole cities have been shelled by Syrian tanks and mortars, and

investigations have led several countries to accuse government forces of using chemical weapons against civilians. Reports of human rights abuses by rebel forces have increased. One group of jihadist rebels has declared itself an *al-Qaeda* affiliate. With over one million people [then] displaced and the death toll [then] over 70,000, the war rages on, threatening the stability of the region.”

According to Genocide Watch, “Violent attacks on civilians by the al-Assad regime have continued to escalate in brutality as the government and opposition forces vie for control of strategic locations. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, in February 2013 the death toll in Syria was approaching 70,000 - an overwhelming increase since July 2011, when Genocide Watch issued its first Genocide Alert for Syria. As of April 2012, the U.N. Refugee Agency recorded over 1,300,000 refugees having fled to neighboring countries, mainly Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.”

As the intense struggle for power continues between the al-Assad government and opposition fighters, the government has tried to close off borders and shut down the Internet. However, information on the mass atrocities has been obtained from victims and witnesses by the U.N. Human Rights Council, the B.B.C., Human Rights Watch, and the Arab League’s Commission of Inquiry. Video footage of the violence and witness testimonies continue to surface on the Internet and are broadcast on world mass media. Although the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria has cited abuses on both sides, its report in February 2013 held that government atrocities far outweighed those committed by rebels.

The evidence is conclusive - noted Genocide Watch - “that the al-Assad regime is committing intentional crimes against humanity. Among the crimes the al-Assad regime is committing are: indiscriminant, widespread attacks on civilians, arbitrary detention of thousands in the political opposition, genocidal massacres of whole villages of Sunni Muslims, rape of detainees, widespread torture - including torture and murder of children - and denial of food, medicines and other essential resources to civilians.

In the view of Genocide Watch, the al-Assad government believes it is about to lose all power in a zero-sum, winner take all revolution. Its massacres have become genocidal. Early warning signs and stages of genocide in Syria are:

- prior unpunished genocidal massacres, such as those perpetrated by al-Assad’s father

in Hama in the 1980s;

- rule by a minority sect - the Alawite sect which supports al-Assad - with an exclusionary ideology;
- systematic human rights atrocities;
- fear by the ruling *élite* that any compromise will mean total loss of their power;
- deliberate targeting of particular groups - Sunni Muslims and army defectors;
- denial by the Syrian government that it is committing crimes against humanity, blaming “foreign-inspired terrorist gangs” for the armed conflict.

As the organisation noted: “Previous efforts by the U.N. Security Council to pass a resolution proposed by the Arab League, calling for the resignation of President al-Assad and supporting an Arab League peace plan, were impeded by Russia and China’s veto. A nearly identical U.N. General Assembly Resolution was passed in 2012 by a vote of 137 to 12, and the past U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan, denounced the al-Assad government’s crimes against humanity. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, issued a recommendation that the U.N. Security Council refer evidence of atrocities committed by government forces in Syria to the International Criminal Court. In April 2012 a peace proposal called for a U.N.-supervised ceasefire, but the deadline passed with no lessening of violence. Plans such as the U.N. Supervision Mission in Syria have continued to fall through due to the intense, ongoing violence.

Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed United Nations and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria in August 2012. He has proposed an arms embargo on both sides. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also supports ending the supply of weapons on both sides. However the Arab League opposes this action because al-Assad continues to receive military supplies from Iran and Russia. In April 2013 the U.N. Security Council issued a non-binding statement that “The escalating violence is completely unacceptable and must end immediately,” and that the Council “urged all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access for aid organizations to those in need in all areas of Syria.” But the U.N. has taken no action.”

Finally, Genocide Watch wrote: “Despite the Syrian National Coalition being granted Syria’s seat at the Arab League in March 2013, factions remain within the opposition forces, and there is growing concern of spillover from the conflict to other countries in the region. There

is still hesitation among Western countries to provide further aid and arms to the rebels. Russia rejects any actions that could lead to regime change. The pressure on the United States to urge regional allies to intervene has increased with recent reports citing the use of chemical weapons by the al-Assad regime.”

and it offered a set of recommendations:

- “The Arab League, Turkey, the Islamic Conference, and other nations should demand an immediate cease-fire in Syria, with full rights for non-violent protest.
- The Arab League and Turkey should quickly create an Islamic Court to try al-Assad and other Syrian officials for crimes against humanity under Islamic law;
- The Arab League, Turkey, European Union, United States and other nations should impose targeted national and regional sanctions against financial accounts, visas, and businesses owned by top officials of the Syrian regime and its army;
- Arab and N.A.T.O. nations should offer to cooperate with Russia to airlift and ship in humanitarian and medical relief supplies to all parts of Syria;
- The U.N. General Assembly should pass another resolution demanding fully protected access for UN and international aid workers and journalists to all areas of Syria.”

Not much has come of all that.

There is no question that action is needed - and urgently.

The U.N. has confirmed a death toll over 100,000 people, the vast majority of whom have been killed by al-Assad’s troops. An estimated 4.5 million people have been displaced from their homes.

* * *

International observers have [overwhelmingly confirmed](#) al-Assad’s complicity in the preponderance of war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Syrian people.

On 15 August 2012 *Reuters* was able to confirm that, according to United Nations investigators, “Syrian government forces and allied militia have committed war crimes including murder and torture of civilians in what appears to be state-directed policy.

Syrian rebels fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad had also committed war crimes, including executions, but on a smaller scale than those by the army and security forces.”

There followed a call for the U.N. Security Council to take “appropriate action” given the gravity of documented violations by all sides in a 17-month conflict which, the investigators said, had become a civil war.

“We have identified both parties as guilty of war crimes and of course a greater number and of bigger variety from the government side.” Ms. Karen AbuZayd, one of two commissioners aided by some 20 investigators, told the agency in a telephone interview.

Prof. Paulo Pinheiro, the commissioner who led the probe, said that a Syria’s army of 300,000 had targeted rebel-held areas of cities with heavy artillery and helicopters. It had “much more means to inflict war crimes, for example bombing civilian populations.” “Besides evidence, we have names connected to the evidence.” Pinheiro told *Reuters*, speaking from his native [Brazil](#). “But we are not a judicial or prosecutorial body. This is a problem for the Security Council, not for us.”

The Security Council can refer a case to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, but [Russia](#) and [China](#) - which have veto power - have been loath to condemn [Syria](#).

The independent investigators conducted more than 1,000 interviews, mainly with Syrian refugees or defectors who had fled to neighbouring countries, over the previous year to produce their latest 102-page report to the U.N. Human Rights Council.

They found “reasonable grounds” to affirm that government forces and their allied *shabbiha* militia had committed crimes against humanity, war crimes and other gross violations. These included “unlawful killing, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual violence, indiscriminate attack, pillaging and destruction of property.”

Government forces and *shabbiha* militia had raped men, women and children in acts which could be prosecuted as crimes against humanity, the investigators said. Government troops had even targeted staff of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, another war crime.

The report indicated that “Evidence confirmed a previous finding that violations had been committed pursuant to State policy.” Large-scale operations conducted in different provinces,

their similar complexity and integrated military/security apparatus “indicate involvement at the highest levels of the armed and security forces and the government.”

Rebels had killed captured government soldiers, *shabbiha* and suspected informers, sometimes after summary trials, the investigators said. “Executing a prisoner without affording fundamental judicial guarantees is a war crime.” they added.

“We have many instances reported to us where the anti-government forces have executed prisoners. They say they don't have detention facilities and are not based in one territory and can't take care of them. This is a war crime.” Pinheiro said.

Both government forces and armed insurgents had displayed “more brutal tactics and new military capabilities” as fighting escalated during recent months, the report said.

Each side had violated children's rights. According to the report, at least 125 youths under age 18, mainly boys, had been killed since February 2012, while others were arbitrarily arrested without charge. “Children described having been beaten, whipped with electrical cables, burned with cigarettes and subjected to electrical shocks to the genitals.” the investigators said of those in the custody of state forces. Armed insurgents continue to use children as couriers or to help with medical evacuations.

Syrian rebels fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad had also committed war crimes, including executions, but on a smaller scale than those by the army and security forces.

These included “unlawful killing, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual violence, indiscriminate attack, pillaging and destruction of property.”

Completing their probe into a massacre in the town of Houla in May 2012, that the government blamed on Islamist ‘terrorists’, they said government forces and *shabbiha* fighters were responsible for the killings of more than 100 civilians. Forty-one children were killed in Houla, including some by shelling, “but most appeared to have been shot at close range.”

The investigators said they would update their confidential list of suspects or units responsible for crimes and give it to U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Dr. Navi Pillay, when their mandate ended in September 2012.

Needless to say, both the al-Assad government and ‘the rebels’ accused the other party of ‘massacring’ more than 1,300 people in chemical weapons attacks near Damascus; many of the victims were said to have choked to death. The accusations came as a team of U.N. inspectors was in Syria to probe previous allegations of chemical weapons strikes levelled against both sides during the 30-month conflict.

‘Western’ governments demanded an immediate investigation into the new allegations. Russia, a longstanding ally of the Damascus government, echoed the call but said it suspected a ‘provocation’ by the opposition and its foreign supporters.

Videos distributed by activists, the authenticity of which could not immediately be verified, showed medics attending to suffocating children and hospitals being overwhelmed. More footage showed dozens of people laid out on the ground, among them many children, some of them covered in white sheets.

The claim of chemical weapons use, which could not be independently confirmed, was vehemently denied by the Syrian government which said it was intended to hinder the work of the U.N. weapons inspectors already in the country.

Rebel sources accused the Syrian army of multiple chemical weapons strikes - one in Moadamiyet al-Sham, southwest of Damascus, and more in the capital’s eastern suburbs.

The ‘Local Coordination Committees’, a network of activists, reported hundreds of casualties in the use of toxic gas. The attack “led to suffocation of the children and overcrowding field hospitals with hundreds of casualties amid extreme shortage of medical supplies to rescue the victims, particularly atropine.” the L.C.C. said.

And in videos posted on YouTube, the ‘Syrian Revolution General Commission’, another activist group, showed what it called “a terrible massacre committed by regime forces with toxic gas.”

In one video, children were seen being given first aid in a field hospital, notably oxygen to help them breathe. Doctors appeared to be trying to resuscitate unconscious children.

Specialists in the impact of chemical weapons said the video evidence was not entirely convincing.

“At the moment, I am not totally convinced because the people that are helping them are without any protective clothing and without any respirators.” said Prof. Paula Vanninen, director of Verifin, the Finnish Institute for Verification of the Chemical Weapons Convention. “In a real case, they would also be contaminated and would also be having symptoms.”

The head of the Chemical and Biological Security Project at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Dr. John Hart, said that he had not seen the symptoms in the eyes of the victims which would be compelling evidence of chemical weapons use. “Of the videos that I’ve seen for the last few hours, none of them show pinpoint pupils ... this would indicate exposure to organophosphorus nerve agents.” he said.

Gwyn Winfield, the editor of *Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Defense World* magazine, which specialises in chemical weapons issues, said that the evidence did not suggest that the chemicals used were of the weapons-grade that the Syrian army possesses in its stockpiles. “We’re not seeing reports that doctors and nurses ... are becoming fatalities, so that would suggest that the toxicity of it isn’t what we would consider military sarin. It may well be that it is a lower-grade.” Winfield told *Agence France-Presse*.

A spokesperson for the ‘National Coalition’ said that the incident was a “coup de grace that kills all hopes for a political solution in Syria. The Syrian regime is mocking the U.N. and the great powers when it strikes targets near Damascus, while the [U.N. weapons inspectors] are just a few steps away.” he said.

The *Syrian Arab News Agency* said “reports on the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta - the Damascus suburbs - are totally false. It’s an attempt to prevent the U.N. commission of inquiry from carrying out its mission.”

The Syrian Government denied as “null, void and totally unfounded” the opposition’s allegations, describing them as a “desperate bid to conceal their failures on the battlefield.”

Britain, France and the United States sought an urgent meeting of the U.N. Security Council to discuss the allegations. The U.S. had previously described activity such as chemical weapons use as a ‘red line’ which might prompt it to intervene militarily in Syria.

The European Union High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton said that the allegations “should be immediately and thoroughly investigated.” The U.N. mission already in Syria “must be allowed full and unhindered access to all sites.” she said.

Russia, which had previously said it has proof of chemical weapons use by the rebels, expressed deep scepticism about their claims. The foreign ministry said that the timing of the allegations as U.N. inspectors began their work “makes us think that we are once again dealing with a premeditated provocation.”

The history of chemical and biological warfare is riddled with false allegations, misinformation and propaganda. This makes it much more difficult to work out what has happened in a legitimate and transparent way. It was understandable that there would be calls for something to be done in response to what United States Secretary of State John Kerry condemned as a “moral obscenity.” Yet, given the circumstances and the complexity of the conflict which has engulfed Syria, there was a need to exercise caution and precaution.

According to the emerging ‘western’ narrative, there was little doubt that something horrific had happened in Ghouta. However, there was not as yet a credible ‘chain of custody’ from sampling to analysis and it was difficult to determine the exact nature of the agent or agents used or what exactly transpired.

Adding to the complexity, acquiring such information is never easy: “obtaining reliable chemical analyses is not nearly as simple as non-specialists might think.” Yet without either “some kind of smoking gun” or details on the circumstances of the chemicals’ release, the truth about what happened remained highly uncertain.

It was certainly possible that the Syrian government had employed chemical weapons, but the timing of the attack, occurring so shortly after the arrival of inspectors, so close to where they were operating, raises questions. One wondered whether it was entirely reasonable to discount the possibility, raised by Dr. Carla Del Ponte, a member of the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria in relation to earlier allegations, that “the rebels have used chemical weapons.”

While this possibility was of no comfort to the ‘western’ narrative on the Syrian conflict, uncritically accepting the prevailing account of events in Ghouta ignored the extent to which the history of chemical and biological warfare is riddled with false allegations, misinformation and propaganda which have often been deftly exploited by well-intentioned as well as unscrupulous people to vilify enemies and to calumniate rivals.

Uncritical and therefore unscientific acceptance of a particularly framing of events also undermined the U.N. inspectors’ efforts to conduct independent, on-site, fact-finding activities about what happened which could feed into more informed and transparent future action. That uncertainty meant that it is not just difficult to formulate an evidence-based solution, it was irrational even to try, let alone claim, this.

The provision of more objective evidence would have provided the international community with a better basis to pursue future legal action. Without it, one was dealing with ‘wild western’, rather than justice - even ‘western’ justice. One of the parties within the territory of Syria - if not the government itself - had committed a serious violation of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict. Under the circumstances, that party could thus be liable to prosecution before the International Criminal Court.

The alternative, limited military options available to ‘western’ governments - including most probably a single ‘punitive attack’ involving multiple missile strikes - was subject to risk, uncertainty, ambiguity and ignorance. Under such conditions a legal approach, which is much more suited to dealing with uncertainty than military strikes, was likely to be a more fruitful and safer course of action in the longer term.

Given the risks, uncertainties, ambiguities and ignorance attached to all the available policy options, a response of caution, precaution and transparency was called for.

This was destined to be unpopular among many. Yet, as terrible as the use of chemical weapons is, terrifying actions have taken place against civilians on a daily basis during this two-year humanitarian catastrophe, and have generated only a limited response.

Given the risks of western involvement in yet another war in the Middle East, caution was required to allow U.N. inspectors the time to gather the necessary evidence and generate the technical information needed for a law enforcement option to emerge.

* * *

An anti-Syria policy on the part of the United States goes back many years and was conceived in the context of wider operations targeting Iranian influence across the Middle East.

Such manoeuvres were well known during the George W. Bush administration. It was revealed in May 2007 that the Central Intelligence Agency had received secret presidential approval to mount a covert 'black' operation to destabilise the Iranian government.

The informants, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the subject, said that President Bush had signed a "nonlethal presidential finding" which put into motion a Central Intelligence Agency plan which reportedly included a coordinated campaign of propaganda, disinformation and manipulation of Iran's currency and international financial transactions. "I can't confirm or deny whether such a program exists or whether the president signed it, but it would be consistent with an overall American approach trying to find ways to put pressure on the regime." said a recently retired C.I.A. senior official who dealt with Iran and other countries in the region.

The sources said that the C.I.A. developed the covert plan over the previous year and received approval from White House officials and other officials in the intelligence community. Officials said that the covert plan was designed to pressure Iran to stop its nuclear enrichment programme and end aid to insurgents in Iraq. "There are some channels where the United States government may want to do things without its hand showing, and legally, therefore, the administration would, if it's doing that, need an intelligence finding and would need to tell the Congress." said the American Broadcasting Company News consultant Richard Clarke, a former White House counter-terrorism official. Active and former intelligence officials said that the approval of the covert action meant that the Bush administration had then decided not to pursue a military option against Iran.

"Vice President Cheney helped to lead the side favouring a military strike." said a retired C.I.A. official, and he went on "but I think they have come to the conclusion that a military strike has more downsides than upsides."

It was thought that economic pressure on Iran may be the most effective tool available to the C.I.A., particularly in going after secret accounts used to fund the nuclear programme.

In any event, under the law, the C.I.A. needed an official presidential finding to carry out such covert actions. ‘Presidential findings’ are kept secret but reported to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and other key congressional leaders.

“I think everybody in the region knows that there is a proxy war already afoot with the United States supporting anti-Iranian elements in the region as well as opposition groups within Iran.” said Prof. Vali Nasr, adjunct senior fellow for Mideast studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. “And this covert action is now being escalated by the new U.S. directive, and that can very quickly lead to Iranian retaliation and a cycle of escalation can follow.” Nasr said. Other ‘lethal’ findings have authorised C.I.A. covert actions against *al-Qaeda*, terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

A range of quotations from a lengthy essay by Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker* of 5 March 2007 gives a measure of the American administrations’ attitude to Syria and other countries of the Middle East. Significantly they must all be seen in the context of American concern for gas and oil. If the conquest of Syria will succeed there will be one last target: Iran - the last of the seven countries mentioned by Paul Wolfowitz in 1991 to General Clark.

Describing what the Bush administration called ‘a strategic shift’, Hersh wrote:

“To undermine Iran, which is predominantly Shiite, the Bush Administration has decided, in effect, to reconfigure its priorities in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the Administration has coöperated with Saudi Arabia’s government, which is Sunni, in clandestine operations that are intended to weaken Hezbollah, the Shiite organization that is backed by Iran. The U.S. has also taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria. A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.”

The new American policy, in its broad outlines, had been discussed publicly.

“In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that there is “a new strategic alignment in the Middle East,”

separating “reformers” and “extremists”; she pointed to the Sunni states as centers of moderation, and said that Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah were “on the other side of that divide.” (Syria’s Sunni majority is dominated by the Alawi sect.) Iran and Syria, she said, “have made their choice and their choice is to destabilize.”

“The key players behind the redirection - as Hersh called it - are Vice-President Dick Cheney, the deputy national-security adviser Elliott Abrams, the departing Ambassador to Iraq (and nominee for United Nations Ambassador), Zalmay Khalilzad, and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi national-security adviser.”

President George W. Bush, in a speech on 10 January 2007 had partially spelled out the new ‘redirection’ approach, wrote Hersh. “These two regimes” - Iran and Syria - “are allowing terrorists and insurgents to use their territory to move in and out of Iraq.” Bush said. “Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops. We will disrupt the attacks on our forces. We’ll interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.”

At Ms. Rice’s Senate appearance in January 2007, then Democratic Senator Joseph Biden, of Delaware, pointedly asked her whether the United States planned to cross the Iranian or the Syrian border in the course of a pursuit.

As recorded by Hersh: “Obviously, the President isn’t going to rule anything out to protect our troops, but the plan is to take down these networks in Iraq,” Rice said, adding, “I do think that everyone will understand that - the American people and I assume the Congress expect the President to do what is necessary to protect our forces.”

The ambiguity of Rice’s reply prompted a response from Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel, a Republican, [whom President Barack Obama nominated for U.S. Secretary of Defense] who has been critical of the Administration: “*Some of us remember 1970, Madam Secretary. And that was Cambodia. And when our government lied to the American people and said, “We didn’t cross the border going into Cambodia,” in fact we did.* I happen to know something about that, as do some on this committee. So, Madam Secretary, when you set in motion the kind of policy that the President is talking about here, it’s very, very dangerous.” [Emphasis added]

The Administration's concern about Iran's role in Iraq is coupled with its long-standing alarm over Iran's nuclear programme. On Fox News on January 14th, Cheney warned of the possibility, in a few years, "of a nuclear-armed Iran, astride the world's supply of oil, able to affect adversely the global economy, prepared to use terrorist organizations and/or their nuclear weapons to threaten their neighbors and others around the world." He also said, "If you go and talk with the Gulf states or if you talk with the Saudis or if you talk with the Israelis or the Jordanians, the entire region is worried. ... The threat Iran represents is growing."

Passing to deal with Prince Bandar bin Sultan, a member of the House of Saud who was Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States from 1983 to 2005, and concerning 'the Prince's game', Hersh wrote:

"The Administration's effort to diminish Iranian authority in the Middle East has relied heavily on Saudi Arabia and on Prince Bandar, the Saudi national-security adviser. Bandar served as the Ambassador to the United States for twenty-two years, until 2005, and has maintained a friendship with President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. In his new post, he continues to meet privately with them. Senior White House officials have made several visits to Saudi Arabia recently, some of them not disclosed.

Last November [2006], Cheney flew to Saudi Arabia for a surprise meeting with King Abdullah and Bandar. The *Times* reported that the King warned Cheney that Saudi Arabia would back its fellow-Sunnis in Iraq if the United States were to withdraw. A European intelligence official told me that the meeting also focussed on more general Saudi fears about "the rise of the Shiites." In response, "The Saudis are starting to use their leverage - money."

This is a game that Saudi Arabia would replay with Syria, the ultimate purpose of it - it seems - is challenging the spread of Shiite power in the Middle East.

Hersh continued: "In the nineteen-eighties and the early nineties, the Saudi government offered to subsidize the covert American C.I.A. proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Hundreds of young Saudis were sent into the border areas of Pakistan, where they set up religious schools, training bases, and recruiting facilities. Then, as now, many of

the operatives who were paid with Saudi money were Salafis. Among them, of course, were Osama bin Laden and his associates, who founded Al Qaeda, in 1988.

This time, the U.S. government consultant told me, Bandar and other Saudis have assured the White House that “they will keep a very close eye on the religious fundamentalists. Their message to us was ‘We’ve created this movement, and we can control it.’ It’s not that we don’t want the Salafis to throw bombs; it’s *who* they throw them at - Hezbollah, Moqtada al-Sadr, Iran, and at the Syrians, if they continue to work with Hezbollah and Iran.”

Coming towards the end of his essay Hersh noted that: “... the Saudi government, with Washington’s approval, would provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the government of President Bashar Assad, of Syria. The Israelis believe that putting such pressure on the Assad government will make it more conciliatory and open to negotiations. Syria is a major conduit of arms to Hezbollah. The Saudi government is also at odds with the Syrians over the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, in Beirut in 2005, for which it believes the Assad government was responsible. Hariri, a billionaire Sunni, was closely associated with the Saudi regime and with Prince Bandar. (A U.N. inquiry strongly suggested that the Syrians were involved, but offered no direct evidence; there are plans for another investigation, by an international tribunal.)”

The Pentagon consultant held a different view. He said that the Administration had turned to Bandar as a “fallback,” because it had realised that the failing war in Iraq could leave the Middle East “up for grabs.”

Further on, Hersh recorded that “In January 2007, after an outburst of street violence in Beirut involving supporters of both the Siniora government and Hezbollah, Prince Bandar flew to Tehran to discuss the political impasse in Lebanon and to meet with Ali Larijani, the Iranians’ negotiator on nuclear issues. According to a Middle Eastern ambassador, Bandar’s mission - which the ambassador said was endorsed by the White House - also aimed “to create problems between the Iranians and Syria.” There had been tensions between the two countries about Syrian talks with Israel, and the Saudis’ goal was to encourage a breach. However, the ambassador said, “It did not work. Syria and Iran are not going to betray each other. Bandar’s approach is very unlikely to succeed.”

Walid Jumblatt, who is the leader of the Druze minority in Lebanon and a strong Siniora supporter, has attacked Nasrallah as an agent of Syria, and has repeatedly told foreign journalists that Hezbollah is under the direct control of the religious leadership in Iran. In a conversation with me last December, he depicted Bashar Assad, the Syrian President, as a “serial killer.” Nasrallah, he said, was “morally guilty” of the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the murder, last November, of Pierre Gemayel, a member of the Siniora Cabinet, because of his support for the Syrians.

Jumblatt then told me that he had met with Vice-President Cheney in Washington last fall to discuss, among other issues, the possibility of undermining Assad. He and his colleagues advised Cheney that, if the United States does try to move against Syria, members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would be “the ones to talk to.” Jumblatt said.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a branch of a radical Sunni movement founded in Egypt in 1928, engaged in more than a decade of violent opposition to the regime of Hafez Assad, Bashar’s father. In 1982, the Brotherhood took control of the city of Hama; Assad bombarded the city for a week, killing between six thousand and twenty thousand people. Membership in the Brotherhood is punishable by death in Syria. The Brotherhood is also an avowed enemy of the United States and of Israel. Nevertheless, Jumblatt said, “We told Cheney that the basic link between Iran and Lebanon is Syria - and to weaken Iran you need to open the door to effective Syrian opposition.”

There is evidence that the Administration’s ‘redirection’ strategy has already benefitted the Brotherhood. The Syrian National Salvation Front is a coalition of opposition groups whose principal members are a faction led by Abdul Halim Khaddam, a former Syrian Vice-President who defected in 2005, and the Brotherhood. A former high-ranking C.I.A. officer told Hersh: “The Americans have provided both political and financial support. The Saudis are taking the lead with financial support, but there is American involvement.” He said that Khaddam, who now lives in Paris, was getting money from Saudi Arabia, with the knowledge of the White House. In 2005, a delegation of the Front’s members met with officials from the National Security Council, according to press reports. A former White House official told Hersh that the Saudis had provided members of the Front with travel documents.

Jumblatt said that he understood that the issue was a sensitive one for the White House. “I told Cheney that some people in the Arab world, mainly the Egyptians” - whose moderate Sunni leadership has been fighting the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood for decades - “won’t like it if the United States helps the Brotherhood. But if you don’t take on Syria we will be face to face in Lebanon with Hezbollah in a long fight, and one we might not win.”

* * *

On 16 June 2013 the former French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas revealed the existence of a plot which was devised by several western countries - primarily Britain and France - to topple the Syrian government even before the crisis started in Syria.

Now, Roland Dumas is not the ordinary two-bit politician who tells what her/his advisers collect.

Dumas, now 91 years old, is a distinguished lawyer and French Socialist politician, who served notably as Foreign Minister from 1984 to 1986 and from 1988 to 1993, and was later President of the Constitutional Council from 1995 to 1999.

In an exclusive interview given to the [Syrian Arab News Agency](#)'s correspondent in Paris, Dumas said that while he was in England before the crisis began in Syria, he was invited to a party where two people an Englishman and a Frenchman, asked him if he would like to participate in preparations for an attack on Syria to topple the al-Assad government.

He emphasised: “This was in Britain not in America. Britain was organizing an invasion of rebels into Syria. They even asked me, although I was no longer minister for foreign affairs, if I would like to participate.”

He said that he refused the offer, but events proved that they were serious about what they said at that evening.

Dumas voiced surprise over the French government's position, saying that the paths chosen by the governments of former President Nicolas Sarkozy and current President Francois Holland are not the right paths which would lead to peace in Syria.

On the 'West's goals from toppling the Syrian state, Dumas said that he thought the current international climate formed around the Syrian situation are contentious because of the policies adopted several years ago to deal with the Arab world; he stressed that the 'West's policies in such issues are not policies of peace but rather of war, and that he personally is against war and supports a path which would lead to peace.

Regarding the Syrian 'opposition', Dumas said that this opposition is multifaceted, and that countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia are involved in financing the fighting taking place in Syria.

"A peaceful solution is not achieved by letting people fight." he said, stressing that sending weapons will not solve problems in Syria.

Dumas pointed out that the Syrian government is reclaiming areas previously seized by gunmen, and noted that France had been opposing the suggestion of holding an international conference on Syria in a manner contrary to its traditional political creed, but eventually it admitted that the conference must be held as soon as possible and its position on Iran's participation in the conference was altered.

Dumas said that the most important point is the agreement between Russia and the United States on holding such conference, noting that there must not be any preconceptions about the conference.

On the G8 meeting in Ireland, Dumas said that it was not the optimal place for discussing Syria because many countries interested in the Syrian issue were not there, which is why the conference due to be held in Geneva is important.

Regarding the news that France was sending advanced weapons to terrorist groups in Syria, Dumas said that sending weapons contradicts peaceful solutions because weapons are made for war.

He noted that there were discussions on the issue of weapons because ‘the West’ is concerned over who will receive the weapons, pointing out to the case of Libya where weapons disappeared, and repeating that sending weapons to Syria will exacerbate the conflict and make it more difficult to resolve.

Dumas said that international laws are only good for achieving peace when its time comes, and that there is no hope of ending the crisis in Syria without having all countries participate in an international conference for this purpose.

He said that the allegations of use of chemical weapons in Syria were very dangerous, and that they brought to mind the disputes which took place about Iraq, when the United States alleged that Iraq possessed chemical weapons and yet none were found. Dumas was adamant in stressing that in legal terms, evidence is procured through judicial channels, not through journalists carrying small bottles which they claim they procured in Syria.

Dumas went on to note that international law has items on destroying chemical weapons which raises concerns, saying it is best to have the UN send impartial and reliable experts to look into this matter.

On France’s double standards in combating terrorists in Mali while supporting them in Syria, Dumas said that France says it will arm the ‘opposition’ but it is unknown what will happen to these weapons, and that there is no way of knowing that these weapons will not be turned against France, adding “this is a great risk ... when we enter a conflict we know it can spread.”

He said that the traditional relations between Syria and France were good, particularly at the cultural level, but all that was undermined and now the two countries are preparing to become enemies.

Dumas pointed out that some sides have a desire to destroy strong Arab states, like what happened in Iraq and Libya before and what is being attempted in Syria, particularly given Syria’s special relations with Russia. He said that Israel plays a role in what is happening in Syria, pointing to the statements of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who said that if an agreement is not reached, then Israel will attack and destroy the governments that stand against it.

On the possibility of France and the ‘West’ changing their position on Syria, Dumas said that this is possible, and that France’s position had shown some development recently which appeared to be a positive indicator and a move in the right direction.

Dumas stressed that there’s massive propaganda being spread regarding events in Syria, with all news, reports and images coming from one source, causing the French public which sees these images every day to form a terrible impression that there are “bad guys” represented by the Syrian government who are killing their people, and on the other side there are “good guys” represented by the armed groups; such propaganda was designed to impress on the French people that the “bad guys” must go and the “good guys” would triumph.

* * *

A combination of several elements - domestic energy shortages, broad environmental considerations and climate-induced droughts, amongst others - was partly responsible for sparking violence which would continue to destabilise Arab world without urgent reforms. Such causes however remain little understood or considered by outside powers.

There is no doubt that ‘the rebels’ have been implicated in tremendous atrocities, but international observers were inclined to confirm that the vast bulk of the increasingly sectarian violence was the responsibility of Bashar al-Assad’s government.

As the conflict was fast taking on international dimensions, amidst unconfirmed allegations that ‘the rebels’ might have used chemical weapons, a new dangerous situation developed following U.S.-supported Israeli air strikes on Syrian military targets in early May 2013.

Still, neither the United States, nor Israel and other external powers could hardly act as honest brokers. Behind the *façade* of humanitarian concern, familiar interests remain at stake. Early in 2013 Iraq gave the green-light for the signing of a framework agreement for construction of pipelines to transport natural gas from Iran’s South Pars field - which it shares with Qatar - across Iraq, to Syria.

The memorandum of understanding for the pipelines was signed in July 2012 - just as Syria’s conflict was spreading to Damascus and Aleppo; the negotiations had begun in 2010. The pipeline, which could be extended to Lebanon and Europe, would potentially solidify Iran’s position as a formidable global player.

The Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline plan was seen as a source of humiliation to Qatar, which had plans for a countervailing pipeline running from Qatar's North field, contiguous with Iran's South Pars field, through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and on to Turkey, also with a view to supply European markets. Clearly, such a pipeline would bypass Russia.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were to have received covert support from the United States in the provision of arms to the most virulent Islamist elements of 'the rebels', while Russia and Iran were known to have supplied arms to al-Assad.

Israel also has a direct and conflicting interest in the Iran-brokered pipeline. In 2003, just a month after the invasion of Iraq, United States and Israeli government sources confirmed the existence of plans to "build a pipeline to siphon oil from newly conquered Iraq to Israel" bypassing Syria.

The basis for the plan, known as the Haifa project, went back to a 1975 memorandum of agreement signed by then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, "whereby the US would guarantee Israel's oil reserves and energy supply in times of crisis." As late as 2007 United States and Israeli government officials were discussing costs and contingencies for the Iraq-Israel pipeline project.

Syria's interest in gas has been spurred by its rapidly declining oil revenues, driven by the peak of its conventional oil production in 1996. Even before the war, the country's rate of oil production had plummeted by nearly half, from a peak of just under 610,000 barrels per day to approximately 385,000 barrels per day in 2010.

Since the onset of the 'civil war', production had dropped further still, by about half, as 'the rebels' had taken control of key oil producing areas.

Faced with dwindling profits from oil exports and a fiscal deficit, the al-Assad government was forced to slash fuel subsidies in May 2008 - which at the time consumed 15 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. The price of petrol tripled overnight, fuelling pressure on food prices.

The crunch came in the context of an intensifying and increasingly regular drought cycle linked to climate change. Between 2002 and 2008 the country's total water resources dropped by half through both overuse and waste.

Once self-sufficient in wheat, Syria has become increasingly dependent on increasingly costly grain imports, which rose by 1 million tonnes in 2011-2012, and then rose again by nearly 30 per cent to about 4 million in 2012-2013. The drought ravaged Syria's farmlands, led to several crop failures, and drove hundreds of thousands of people from predominantly Sunni rural areas into coastal cities traditionally dominated by the Alawite minority.

The exodus inflamed sectarian tensions rooted in al-Assad's longstanding favouritism of his Alawite sect - many members of which are relatives and tribal allies - over the Sunni majority.

Since 2001 in particular, Syrian politics was increasingly repressive even by regional standards, while al-Assad's agreeing to I.M.F.-'strongly suggested' market reforms escalated unemployment and inequality. The new economic policies undermined the rural Sunni poor while expanding the government-linked private sector through a web of corrupt, government-supported joint ventures which empowered the Alawite military *élite* and a parasitic business aristocracy.

Between 2010 and 2011 the price of wheat doubled - brought about by a combination of extreme weather events linked to climate change, oil price sudden rising and intensified speculation on food commodities. Al- Assad government's inability to maintain subsidies due to rapidly declining oil revenues worsened the situation.

The food price hikes triggered the protests which brought about armed rebellion, in response to al-Assad's indiscriminate violence against demonstrators.

The origins of Syria's 'war by proxy' are therefore unmistakeable - the result of converging climate, oil and debt crises within a politically repressive state. The conflict's future now continues to be at the mercy of rival foreign geopolitical interests in dominating the energy corridors of the Middle East and North Africa.

A document released by Wikileaks on 3 June 2012 gives a measure of Syria's situation as described by a an officer's report on a meeting with American intelligence officers.

On 27 February 2012 WikiLeaks had begun publishing *The Global Intelligence Files*. The files contained over five million e-mails from the Texas headquartered 'global intelligence' company *Stratfor*. The e-mails date between July 2004 and late December 2011. They reveal

the inner workings of a company which fronts as an intelligence publisher, but provides confidential intelligence services to large corporations, such as Bhopal's Dow Chemical Co., Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and government agencies, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Marines and the U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency. The emails show *Stratfor*'s web of informers, pay-off structure, payment laundering techniques and psychological methods.

The document was written on 7 December 2011.

Released on 2012, the document was classified as follows: Email-ID 1671459,
 Date 2011-12-07 00:49:18
 From bhalla@stratfor.com
 To secure@stratfor.com

It contains a military officer writing up a report on a meeting with American military intelligence officers and gives telling insight into their view of matters inside Syria. It reads, *inter alia*, as follows:

“I spent most of the afternoon at the Pentagon with the U.S.A.F. strategic studies group - guys who spend their time trying to understand and explain to the U.S.A.F. chief the big picture in areas where they are operating in.

It was just myself and four other guys at the Lieutenant Colonel level, including one French and one British representative who are liaising with the U.S. currently out of D.C.”

Then comes a veiled admission of foreign special forces - the famous “boots on the ground” - already in Syria at that time, and their function:

“There is still a very low level of understanding of what is actually at stake in Syria, what's the strategic interest there, the Turkish role, the Iranian role, etc. After a couple hours of talking, they said without saying that S.O.F. [special operations force] teams, [quite possibly from the United States, Britain, France, Jordan and Turkey] are already on the ground

focused on *recce* [a slang military word for reconnaissance] missions and training opposition forces.

One Air Force intel[ligence] guy (U.S.) said very carefully that there isn't much of a Free Syrian Army to train right now anyway, but all the operations being done now are being done out of 'prudence'."

At that stage of the war any move towards any kind of air campaign and any use of special forces towards that was deemed completely out of the question:

"I kept pressing on the question of what these S.O.F. teams would be working toward, and whether this would lead to an eventual air campaign to give a Syrian rebel group cover. They pretty quickly distanced themselves from that idea, saying that the idea 'hypothetically' is to commit guerrilla attacks, assassination campaigns, try to break the back of the Alawite forces, elicit collapse from within."

Should matters come to an air campaign, the following was the prevailing view:

"They emphasised how the air campaign in Syria makes Libya look like a piece of cake. Syrian air defenses are a lot more robust and are much denser, esp[ecially] around Damascus and on the borders with Israel, Turkey. They are most worried about mobile air defenses, particularly the SA-17s that they've been getting recently. It's still a doable mission, it's just not an easy one." [Emphasis added]

Further on, the document reads:

"The main base they would use is Cyprus, hands down. Brits and French would fly out of there. They kept stressing how much is stored at Cyprus and how much *recce* comes out of there. The group was split on whether Turkey would be involved, but said Turkey would be pretty critical to the mission to base stuff out of there. Even if Turkey had a political problem with Cyprus, they said there is no way the Brits and the French wouldn't use Cyprus as their main air force base. Air Force Intel guy seems pretty convinced that the Turks won't participate (he seemed pretty pissed at them.)

“There still seems to be a lot of confusion over what a military intervention involving an air campaign would be designed to achieve. It isn't clear cut for them geographically like in Libya, and you can't just create an N.F.Z. [no fly zone] over Homs, Hama region. This would entail a countrywide S.E.A.D. [suppression of enemy air defences] campaign lasting the duration of the war. They don't believe air intervention would happen unless there was enough media attention on a massacre, like the Gaddafi move against Benghazi.”

The document continues:

“They think the US would have a high tolerance for killings as long as it doesn't reach that very public stage. They are also questioning the skills of the Syrian forces that are operating the country's air defenses currently and how significant the Iranian presence is there. Air Force Intel guy is most obsessed with the challenge of taking out Syria's ballistic missile capabilities and chem[ical] weapons. With Israel right there and the regime facing an existential crisis, he sees that as a major complication to any military intervention.

The post 2011 S.O.F.A with Iraq is still being negotiated. These guys were hoping that during Biden's visit that he would announce a deal with Maliki, but no such luck. They are gambling on the idea that the Iraqis remember the Iran-Iraq war and that Maliki is not going to want to face the threat of Iranian jets entering Iraqi air space. They say that most US fighter jets are already out of Iraq and transferred to Kuwait. They explained that's the beauty of the air force, the base in Kuwait is just a hop, skip and jump away from their bases in Europe, i.e. very easy to rapidly build up when they need to. They don't seem concerned about the US ability to restructure its forces to send a message to Iran. They gave the example of the USS Enterprise that was supposed to be out of commission already and got extended another couple years to send to the gulf. When the US withdraws, we'll have at least 2 carriers in the gulf out of Centcom [the [United States Central Command](#)] and one carrier in the Med out of EuCom [the [United States European Command](#)]. I asked if the build-up in Kuwait and the carrier deployments are going to be enough to

send a message to Iran that the US isn't going anywhere. They responded that Iran will get the message if they read the Centcom Web Site. Starting Jan. 1 expect them to be publishing all over the place where the US is building up.

Another concern they have about an operation in Syria is whether Iran could impede operations out of *Balad* air force base in Iraq.

The French representative was of the opinion that Syria won't be a Libya-type situation in that France would be gung-ho about going in. Not in an election year. The U.K. rep also emphasized U.K. reluctance but said that the renegotiation of the EU treaty undermines the U.K. role and that U.K. would be looking for ways to reassert itself on the continent (I don't really think a Syria campaign is the way to do that.) UK guy mentioned as an aside that the air force base commander at Cyprus got switched out from a maintenance guy to a guy that flew Raptors, i.e. someone that understands what it means to start dropping bombs. He joked that it was probably a coincidence.

Prior to that, I had a meeting with an incoming Kuwaiti diplomat (will be coded as KU301.) His father was high up in the regime, always by the CP's/PM's side. The diplo[mat] himself still seems to be getting his feet wet in D.C. (the new team just arrived less than 2 weeks ago,) but he made pretty clear that Kuwait was opening the door to allowing U.S. to build up forces as needed. They already have a significant presence there, and a lot of them will be on 90-day rotations. He also said that the S.O.F.A that the U.S. signs with Baghdad at the last minute will be worded in such a way that even allowing one trainer in the country can be construed to mean what the U.S. wants in terms of keeping forces in Iraq. Overall, I didn't get the impression from him that Kuwait is freaked out about the U.S. leaving. Everything is just getting rearranged. The Kuwaitis used to be much better at managing their relations with Iran, but ever since that spy ring story came out a year ago, it's been bad. He doesn't think Iran has significant covert capabilities in the G.C.C. states [the [*Cooperation Council for the*](#)

[Arab States of the Gulf](#)], though they are trying. Iranian activity is mostly propaganda focused. He said that while KSA [King of Saudi Arabia ?] and Bahrain they can deal with it as needed and black out the media, Kuwait is a lot more open and thus provides Iran with more opportunity to shape perceptions (he used to work in information unit in Kuwait.) He says there is a sig number of Kuwaitis that listen to Iranian media like Al Alam especially.

On the Kuwaiti political scene - the government is having a harder time dealing with a more emboldened opposition, but the opposition is still extremely divided, esp[ecially] among the Islamists. The M.P.s now all have to go back to their tribes to rally support for the elections to take place in Feb. Oftentimes an M.P. in Kuwait city will find out that he has lost support back home with the tribe, and so a lot of money is handed out. The government] is hoping that with a clean slate they can quiet the opposition down. A good way of managing the opposition he said is to refer cases to the courts, where they can linger forever. good way for the govt to buy time. He doesn't believe the Arab League will take significant action against Syria - no one is interested in military intervention. They just say it to threaten it.”

So what was this unfolding strategy to undermine Syria and Iran all about ?

The answer was provided long time ago by retired N.A.T.O. Commander General Clark: it has always been about control of the region's vast oil and gas resources.

General Clark returned to the subject in September 2012, in an exclusive conversation available on film.

In it, Gen. Clark explicitly laid out the central role of oil in American military strategy, and advocated for increased use of clean energy alternatives. He also said that the only way to change policy on energy and the military is for a mass public movement to stand up to the oil industry, the richest and most powerful in history. He said that young people have the most to gain, and will have to take the lead.

What follows is part of the transcript: “So energy is about generating electricity. There you can move pretty quickly into solar and wind. Not only are the costs coming down through better engineering and better scientific development, but also battery technology is improving so you can store it and feed it into the power grid at the time you need it, not just when it’s generated.

But on the other hand, there is transportation fuel. And that’s mostly oil. And that’s mostly imported. And that’s what people fight wars about, mostly they don’t fight war about coal, they fight about oil.

In the summer of 1973 in Washington, I wrote three reports about the energy crisis for the Pentagon, one of which looked at the impact of being an oil-importing nation on the United States. And it was pretty clear even then that this would distort America’s foreign policy, spread lots of money abroad, and might ultimately require us to use U.S. troops to secure access to these energy supplies abroad.

Of course that’s exactly what happened. This led then to the creation of al Qaeda, 9/11, our invasion of Afghanistan, the Bush administration decision to invade Iraq. It’s led to expenditures of a couple of trillion dollars and more, much more to follow. And we’re not done yet.

Q: What would you estimate we’re spending annually on keeping the oil pipeline open?

Wesley Clark: Well, it’s 300 billion dollars of U.S. foreign exchange to buy the oil, another 600 billion dollars for the defense budget. Not all of that is directed toward energy but you could say that 150 billion dollars a year we’re spending on the wars is certainly about oil, directly or indirectly.

And you could probably say half of the rest of the defense budget is one way or another connected to stationing troops abroad, trying to protect access to oil, exercises, procurement of equipment. And then you could look at the bill for the Veterans Administration. So this comes out to be half a trillion dollars or more a year, is going to this. It’s been a tragic failure of policy and a failure of US leadership.

How can we replace these barrels of oil with other means of energy? The alternatives are there now, and bio fuels, compressed natural gas, electric automobiles increasingly, liquefied natural gas, coal to liquids. There's lots of different ways to make liquid fuel.

So I think that it's a matter of a struggle for political organizations. I think it does take the kind of movement that you've talked about. I think you have to mobilize young people. I think you have to, not just young people, but young people in particular. After all, they have the most to gain from the future - and the most to lose. And they need to speak up on behalf of these issues.

Because they're going against some very, very powerful forces. Forces of big oil are the most powerful economic forces in the world. If you look at the entire wealth of mankind, the value of oil reserves in the ground is like 170 trillion dollars. It's the most valuable commodity as currently priced in the world. You're going against people who control those reserves. So this can only be done through a mass movement that overturns the established structure of energy markets. It can't be done in a smooth transition."

Much of the strategy currently pursued by the American administration was described in a 2008 report prepared by the Rand Corporation, titled: *The Unfolding the Future of the Long War* and concerning 'Motivations, prospects, and implications for the U.S. Army'.

The 'long war' - says the report at the onset - has been described by some as an epic struggle against adversaries bent on forming a unified Islamic world to supplant western dominance, while others describe it more narrowly as an extension of the 'war on terror'. But while policymakers, military leaders, and scholars have offered numerous definitions of the 'long war', no consensus has been reached about this term or its implications for the United States. To understand the impacts that this 'long war' will have on the U.S. Army and on U.S. forces in general, it is necessary to understand more precisely what the 'long war' is and how it might unfold over the coming years.

It was to address this need, that the study was undertaken and the report deals with; it explores the concept of the 'long war' and identifies potential ways in which it might unfold as well as the implications for the Army and the U.S. military more generally.

The report used the generation of either ‘trajectories’ or alternative paths in which the ‘long war’ might unfold to explore the implications for the U.S. military. The discussion focused on the potential threats the U.S. faces in each ‘trajectory’ and considers the confluence of three major problems raised by the war: 1) those related to the ideologies espoused by key adversaries in the conflict, 2) those related to the use of terrorism, and those related to governance (i.e., its absence or presence, its quality, and the predisposition of specific governing bodies to the United States and its interests). The goal of the report is not to determine which of these areas is the key problem. Instead, the authors took the approach that in order to ensure that this ‘long war’ follows a favourable course, the United States will need to make a concerted effort across all three domains. Numerous broad conclusions and recommendations were given for addressing issues surrounding the ‘long war’.

The report noted that “the economies of the industrialized states will continue to rely heavily on [oil](#), thus making it a strategically important resource.” As most oil will be produced in the Middle East, the United States has “motive for maintaining stability in and good relations with Middle Eastern states”: “The geographic area of proven oil reserves coincides with the power base of much of the Salafi-jihadist network. This creates a linkage between oil supplies and the long war that is not easily broken or simply characterized ... For the foreseeable future, world oil production growth and total output will be dominated by Persian Gulf resources ... The region will therefore remain a strategic priority, and this priority will interact strongly with that of prosecuting the ‘long war’.”

In this context, the report identified several potential ‘trajectories’ for regional policy focused on protecting access to Gulf oil supplies, among which the following are most salient: “Divide and Rule focuses on exploiting fault lines between the various Salafi-jihadist groups to turn them against each other and dissipate their energy on internal conflicts. This strategy relies heavily on covert action, information operations (IO), unconventional warfare, and support to indigenous security forces ... the United States and its local allies could use the nationalist jihadists to launch proxy IO campaigns to discredit the transnational jihadists in the eyes of the local populace ... US leaders could also choose to capitalize on the ‘Sustained Shia-Sunni Conflict’ trajectory by taking the side of the conservative Sunni regimes against Shiite empowerment movements in the Muslim world possibly supporting authoritative Sunni governments against a continuingly hostile Iran.”

Exploring different scenarios for this ‘trajectory’, the report speculated that the United States may concentrate “on shoring up the traditional Sunni regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan as a way of containing Iranian power and influence in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.”

Noting that this could actually empower *al-Qaeda* jihadists, the report concluded that doing so might work in western interests by bogging down *jihadi* activity with internal sectarian rivalry rather than targeting the United States: “One of the oddities of this long war trajectory is that it may actually reduce the al-Qaeda threat to US interests in the short term. The upsurge in Shia identity and confidence seen here would certainly cause serious concern in the Salafi-jihadist community in the Muslim world, including the senior leadership of al-Qaeda. As a result, it is very likely that al-Qaeda might focus its efforts on targeting Iranian interests throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf while simultaneously cutting back on anti-American and anti-Western operations.”

The report noted especially that Syria is among several “downstream countries that are becoming increasingly water scarce as their populations grow”, increasing a risk of conflict. Thus, although the Rand Corporation document fell far short of recognising the prospect of an ‘Arab Spring’, it illustrates that three years before the 2011 uprisings, United States defence officials were concerned about the region’s growing instabilities, and the potential consequences for stability of Gulf oil.

* * *

Four years ago Qatar proposed a gas pipeline from the Gulf to Turkey in a sign that the emirate is considering a further expansion of exports from the world’s biggest gas-field after it finishes an ambitious programme which would more than double its capacity to produce liquefied natural gas.

“We are eager to have a gas pipeline from Qatar to Turkey.” Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the ruler of Qatar said, following talks with the Turkish President Abdullah Gul and the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. “We discussed this matter in the framework of co-operation in the field of energy. In this regard, a working group will be set up that will come up with concrete results in the shortest possible time.” he said, according to Turkey’s *Anatolia* news agency.

Other reports in the Turkish press indicated that the two states were exploring the possibility of Qatar supplying gas to the strategic *Nabucco* pipeline project, which would transport Central Asian and Middle Eastern gas to Europe, bypassing Russia. A Qatar-to-Turkey pipeline might hook up with *Nabucco* at its proposed starting point in eastern Turkey. A month before the meeting, Prime Minister Erdogan and the prime ministers of four European countries signed a transit agreement for *Nabucco*, clearing the way for a final investment decision next year on the E.U.-supported project to reduce European dependence on Russian gas.

The *Nabucco*-West pipeline (also referred to as the Turkey–Austria gas pipeline)



The *Nabucco* pipeline was intended to diversify the natural gas suppliers and delivery routes for Europe, thus reducing [European dependence on Russian energy](#). The original project was supported by several [European Union](#) member states and by the [United States](#), and was seen as a rival to the [South Stream](#) pipeline project. The main supplier was expected to be [Iraq](#), with potential supplies from [Azerbaijan](#), [Turkmenistan](#) and [Egypt](#). The main supply for the *Nabucco*-West would be [Shah Deniz](#) gas through the proposed [Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline](#) (TANAP).

Planning for Nabucco had begun in 2002. From the start, the pipeline was a joint European and American project aimed at undermining Russian influence over the European continent by reducing Russian energy imports. Europe currently obtains 36 per cent of its gas and 20 per cent of its oil from Russia.

From a technical standpoint, however, the project never got very far. In 11 years, no country could be found to be an energy supplier. Iran, Turkmenistan, Egypt and Iraq all pulled out, and Azerbaijan finally rejected the idea.

These difficulties did not prevent the rising of great expectations at a dinner organised in September 2012 in Melbourne by the Australian Pipeline Industry Association, known as APIA, which is an industry association representing Australia's high-pressure transmission pipeline sector, with a principal focus on long-distance oil and gas transmission.

At mid-2013 it appeared that the *Nabucco* pipeline project, which was to have transported gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe in order to bypass Russia, had been abandoned.

The failure of the *Nabucco* project was due to a combination of geopolitical factors and business considerations.

After his meeting with Sheikh Hamad last week, Prime Minister Erdogan said that Turkey wanted a "long-term and stable relationship" with Qatar in energy matters.

"For this aim, I think a gas pipeline between Turkey and Qatar would solve the issue once and for all." Mr. Erdogan added, according to reports in several newspapers. The reports said that two different routes for such a pipeline were possible. One would lead from Qatar through Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq to Turkey. The other would go through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and on to Turkey. It was not clear whether the second option would be connected to the Pan-Arab pipeline, carrying Egyptian gas through Jordan to Syria. That pipeline, which was due to be extended to Turkey, had also been proposed as a source of gas for *Nabucco*.

Based on production from the massive North Field in the Gulf, Qatar had established a commanding position as the world's leading [liquefied natural gas](#) exporter. It is consolidating that position through a construction programme aimed at increasing its annual liquefied natural gas production capacity to 77 million tonnes by the end of

2010 year, from 31 million tonnes in 2008. However, in 2005, the emirate placed a *moratorium* on plans for further development of the North Field in order to conduct a reservoir study. It recently extended the ban for two years to the present.

There are signs that Qatar's government was looking further ahead to what it will do next with massive gas reserves that, at about 900 trillion cubic feet, are the world's third-largest. In August 2009 Saad al Kaabi, the director of oil and gas projects for the government-owned Qatar Petroleum, said that Qatar could produce 23 billion cubic feet per day of gas by 2014. That would be more than triple the emirate's output five years ago of 7.4 billion cubic feet per day, and 64 per cent more than its estimated 14 billion cubic feet per day of potential production once the expansion programme is completed.

Abdullah al Attiyah, the Qatari deputy prime minister and energy minister, expressed concerns about flooding an already glutted international liquefied natural gas market. Exporting gas by pipeline, which is cheaper than cooling it to liquid form for shipment in specialised tankers, might be an attractive alternative. But cross-border pipeline projects more often than not face substantial political hurdles, as *Nabucco*'s proponents had discovered.

The main difficulty for a Qatar-to-Turkey pipeline could be a transit agreement with Saudi Arabia, which has a track record of obstructing regional pipeline projects and for decades has had a tense political relationship with Qatar. "There would have to be some evidence of political will from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the investment community to take this proposal seriously," said Douglas Caskie, the manager of the Abu Dhabi office of the consulting firm IPA Energy and Water Economics, an economic consulting company specialising in infrastructure, transport, electricity, gas, carbon, *energy* and water.

Saudi opposition derailed plans for a gas pipeline from Qatar to Kuwait. The kingdom also objected unsuccessfully to the construction of an undersea pipeline which now carries Qatari gas to the [United Arab Emirates](#) and to a continuing U.A.E. project to build an oil pipeline from Abu Dhabi to Fujairah. Turkey, which does not have major energy resources, is as mindful as E.U. countries of a dependence on Russian gas, and has been seeking a deal to import liquefied natural gas from Qatar. It has also been trying to make the most of its geostrategic position between energy-rich regions such as Russia, the Central Asia and the Middle East, and the European market.

* * *

According to [*Agence France-Presse*](#), at the beginning of August 2013 Russia rejected a Saudi proposal to abandon Syria's president in return for a huge arms deal and a pledge to boost Russian influence in the Arab world.

On 31 July 2013 President Vladimir Putin, a strong supporter of Bashar al-Assad, met Saudi Arabia's influential intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan, after which both Moscow and Riyadh made no disclosure on the substance of the talks.

"Every two years, Bandar bin Sultan meets his Russian counterparts, but this time, he wanted to meet the head of state." said a European diplomat who shuttles between Beirut and Damascus. "During the meeting at the Kremlin, the Saudi official explained to his interlocutor that Riyadh is ready to help Moscow play a bigger role in the Middle East at a time when the United States is disengaging from the region."

Bandar proposed that Saudi Arabia buy US\$ 15 billion of weapons from Russia and invest "considerably in the country", the source said.

The Saudi prince also reassured Putin that "whatever regime comes after" al-Assad, it will be "completely" in the Saudi's hands and will not sign any agreement allowing any Gulf country to transport its gas across Syria to Europe and compete with Russian gas exports, according to the same source.

In 2009 al-Assad had refused to sign an agreement with Qatar for an overland pipeline running from the Gulf to Europe via Syria to protect the interests of its Russian ally, which is Europe's top supplier of natural gas.

An Arab diplomat with contacts in Moscow said: "President Putin listened politely to his interlocutor and let him know that his country would not change its strategy."

"Bandar bin Sultan then let the Russians know that the only option left in Syria was military and that they should forget about Geneva because the opposition would not attend."

Russia and the United States had been trying for months to organise an international peace conference between the Syrian regime and the 'opposition' to take place in Geneva.

Asked about the Putin-Bandar meeting, a Syrian politician said: “As was the case before with Qatar and [Russian Foreign Minister Sergey] Lavrov (in talks), Saudi Arabia thinks that politics is a simple matter of buying people or countries. It doesn’t understand that Russia is a major power and that this is not how it draws up policy.” adding: “Syria and Russia have had close ties for over half a century in all fields and it’s not Saudi rials that will change this fact.”

The meeting between Prince Bandar and President Putin came amid tension between Moscow and Riyadh over the conflict in Syria, as Russia had accused the Saudis of “financing and arming terrorists and extremist groups” in the war which has killed more than 100,000 people since March 2011.

While there was no official reaction to the meeting, Russian experts also said that President Putin had apparently turned down the Saudi offer.

According to military expert Alexander Goltz “such an agreement seems extremely improbable.”

“Support for Assad is a matter of principle for Vladimir Putin.” said the military expert. “Even the bait of \$15 billion, a huge sum that represents two years’ turnover for *Rosoboronexport* [Russia’s arms exporting agency], will have no effect.”

In 2010 al-Assad entered into negotiations for a US\$ 10 billion pipeline plan with Iran, across Iraq to Syria, which would also potentially allow Iran to supply gas to Europe from its South Pars field shared with Qatar. The memorandum of understanding for the project was signed in July 2012 - just as Syria’s ‘civil war’ was spreading to Damascus and Aleppo - and earlier this year Iraq signed a framework agreement for construction of the gas pipelines.

During the past 12 months, with Syria plunged into ‘civil war’, there was no further pipeline talk, amid fears of the European Union of becoming too dependent on Russian *Gazprom*.

Turkey is already the second-largest customer of the Russian supplier and heavily depends on supply from Iran. Now that *Nabucco* has failed it looks upon the TANAP as being critical to realisation of stable export of Russian, Caspian-Central Asian, Iraqi and Iranian oil and gas.

Turkey should not become involved in a proxy ‘civil war’ in Syria.

Syria is presently not a major oil producer; its reserves are dwindling. Yet until the outbreak of conflict, the al-Assad government was receiving US\$ 4 billion a year in oil sales - a third of the government budget.

[Turkey needs Syria to fulfil its energy strategy.](#)

Aware of its position, Syria relies on its strategic importance to the Arab Gas Pipeline from Egypt to Tripoli, Lebanon and the I.P.C. , the Iraq Petroleum Company pipeline from Kirkuk, in Iraq, to Banyas - which is inoperative since the 2003 United States invasion.

The centrepiece of Syria's energy strategy is the '[Four Seas Policy](#)' - a notion introduced by Bashar al-Assad in early 2011, two months before the start of the uprising. It is an energy network linking the Mediterranean, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Gulf.

Clearly, al-Assad was pursuing a very complex two-pronged strategy: on one hand, he was attempting to establish a link with Turkey, and on the other hand to bypass Turkey and join with Iran.

Whether the United States will 'permit' its ally Turkey to implement such a policy is hard to say. Whether it would encourage Turkey to react to the 'duplicity' of al-Assad, and to build in it a *casus belli* to involve Turkey and the rest of N.A.T.O. into a reaction is even harder. For the past almost thirty years the United States has assumed and largely succeeded in influencing some of its allies in assuming an intransigent position against Iran.

In this very complex situation, in February 2013 Iraq gave the green lights to a gas pipeline deal with Iran and Syria.

Iraq had adhered to a framework agreement to be signed for the construction of pipelines through Iraqi territory which would deliver Iranian gas to Syria.

A cabinet statement said that Oil Minister Abdelkarim al-Luaybi had been instructed to sign the deal, by which Iranian liquefied natural gas could be delivered in the future to Europe as well.

In July 2013 Iran, Iraq and Syria had signed a memorandum of understanding for the gas pipelines, with Tehran saying that the total cost of the project would be about US\$10 billion.

The construction of pipelines stretching for several thousand kilometres “should take three to five years once funding is secured.” Iran’s deputy oil minister Javad Ouji said at the time.

Ouji said in July 2012 that the project would call for the construction of a 142 centimetre pipeline with a capacity of 110 million cubic meters a day, connecting southern Iranian port of Assalouyeh to Iraq and then to Syria, with the possibility of extending to Lebanon and Europe.

Iraq should initially receive about 20 million cubic meters a day for its power plants, and Syria between 20 and 25 million cubic meters a day, he said.

Iran presently has the second largest proven gas reserves in the world after Russia. It currently consumes almost all of the approximately 600 million cubic metres (21.8 trillion cubic feet) per day of gas production, but hopes to double its output and export some 250 million cubic metres per day to its neighbours and to Europe from 2015 through developing a giant offshore gas field in the Gulf, which it shares with Qatar.

Iraq’s agreement to allow Iran to build a pipeline through its territory and on to Syria is in direct competition with Qatar’s similar designs for a Syria pipeline which that would connect to Turkey. This pipeline is another source of disagreement in the Syrian conflict theatre and Iran’s response to its loss of ground here. It is also a sign of Iran’s growing influence on in Iraq.

The first part of the pipeline - some 225 kilometres - through Iraq will reportedly be completed was to have been completed by mid-2013. The pipeline will connect the southern Iranian port of Assolouyeh to Iraq and then to Syria, for the time being. It will have a 110 million cubic metre per day capacity. The plan is to give Iraq 20 million cubic metres per day of Iranian liquefied natural gas for its power plants, with 20-25 million cubic meters per day going to Syria.

This was a severe blow to Qatar’s plans. Iraqi authorities also said that the pipeline could eventually be extended to Europe. This could be a little problematic. The current sanctions regime of course would not allow this Iranian gas into the European market.

Certainly there are many external forces at play in Syria: Saudi, Qatari, Russian and above all American, with all its appendices such as English and French interests.

A military intervention by ‘the West’ - decisive perhaps at first because of the superiority of the United States - could repeat the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq. It would go perilously close to another form of intervention by proxy on the part of Russia - China, too, maybe ?

If the air force were not successful, though, a call to ‘accomplish the mission’ and to ‘victory’ would lead to the intervention by ‘boots of the ground.’ And that, according to the American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey “would commit us decisively to the conflict. In a variety of ways, the use of US military force can change the military balance, but it cannot resolve the underlying and historic ethnic, religious, and tribal issues that are fueling this conflict.

Syria today is not about choosing between two sides but rather about choosing one among many sides. It is my belief that the side we choose must be ready to promote their interests and ours when the balance shifts in their favor. Today, they are not. The crisis in Syria is tragic and complex. It is a deeply rooted, long-term conflict among multiple factions, and violent struggles for power will continue after Assad’s rule ends. We should evaluate the effectiveness of limited military options in this context.”

These are prudent, even wise, words, particularly coming from a military man.

The situation is even more difficult to examine from the far away point of Australia.

In the wake of the British parliament’s vote against military action in Syria, the Australian ‘Labor’ government was one of the few that has openly declared its support for US military strikes on the basis of lies about the Syrian regime’s alleged use of chemical weapons.

During a joint press conference on 31 August 2013 with [then] Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the [then] Foreign Minister Bob Carr declared that the United States enjoyed Australian support to take action against Syria, but ruled out Australian military involvement. Parroting the line from Washington, Senator Carr claimed that any action would be “limited and narrow” and would not involve “boots on the ground.”

Mr. Rudd declared that he had “high confidence” that the Syrian government was responsible for the alleged chemical weapons attack near Damascus, but provided not a *scintilla* of evidence to support the claim. Having declared two days before that the Australian government would work within the United Nations to ensure agreement on a “robust response,” Mr. Rudd, proceeding in lockstep with the Obama administration, supported unilateral American strikes. He was supported in that by the entire Australian political establishment. Such display of prostration before a ‘Great and powerful friend’ has a *continuum* in Australian foreign and domestic policy - at least since the Royal-C.I.A. *coup* of November 1975, which led to the dismissal of the twice-elected Whitlam government.

Since then, successive ‘Labor’ governments have shown to understand that nothing should be said which even remotely criticised the action of any American administration: Ford, Carter, Reagan, George Bush Sr., Clinton, George W. Bush or Barack Obama.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s ‘AM’ programme on 31 August, [then] Foreign Minister Carr was at pains to claim that “America in this case [was] not seeking strategic advantage, it is not doing that; *not seeking an economic advantage like access to oil.*” [Emphasis added] The [then] Foreign Minister, a person quite able to distinguish truth from falsehood, but ‘connected’ for the past thirty years to the interests of the American administrations, intended to sound convincing, despite the obvious fact that what the United States precisely wishes to achieve is to destabilise and remove the government of President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Iran and Russia, as part of its broader plans to secure American economic and strategic domination in the Middle East - in one word: oil.

The so-called Australian Labor government was resoundingly defeated at the federal election of 7 September 2013. Rudd, Carr and company were dispatched. It is too early to say, but the provenance and words of the then Opposition, as well as the first measures of the ‘Coalition’ he heads (18 men + one woman !, urban conservative and country backwoodsmen - and all reactionary) and which was sworn in on 18 September could be found in the assumption that the strike will come and the sole concern that - as Mr. Tony Abbott, as Leader of the Opposition and now as Prime Minister told the same A.B.C. - “Any punitive strike has got to be targeted, it’s got to be proportionate and it’s got to be carefully considered.”

Mr. Abbott has surrounded himself of persons schooled to Jesuitic nebulous-talk and accustomed to the [servility of sycophants](#).

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