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WHAT'S NEXT FOR SYRIA:

HUMANITARIAN AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction and Moderator:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. FERRIS: Okay. Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to Brookings. My name is Beth Ferris, I'm a senior fellow here at Brookings and co-director of the Brookings LSE Project on Internal Displacement. We work primarily on humanitarian issues.

But today we're pleased to offer this program that's being organized together with our Saban Center on the Middle East that will focus on the humanitarian situation inside and around Syria and also some of the political implications of that situation.

This intersection between politics and humanitarian issues is one that's fraught with dangers, particularly for humanitarian organizations, which depend on their acting in a neutral and impartial way in order to have access to those in need.

We have two speakers today. The first will be from UNHCR, and we're delighted to have Panos Moumtzis, who is the regional refugee coordinator for Syrian refugees. He's on the road a lot, as you might imagine, going from capital to capital, camp to camp, and occasionally coming to the United States and other countries to talk about the situation there.

He coordinates their United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees response to the crisis in Syria and neighboring countries and, as

we'll hear, there are hundreds of thousands of refugees, millions, perhaps many millions of people displaced inside Syria. He's worked with UNRA, particularly with Palestinian refugees, both in Syria and elsewhere, and has, like many, a long experience with humanitarian issues having worked for some 22 years with UNHCR. He's worked on crises in such areas as Iraq, Kenya, Rwanda, and Cote d'Ivoire.

We'll then turn to Fred Hof, who's now a senior fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. He has a long and distinguished career in public service having served with the U.S. State Department, including responsibilities for transition in Syria, which is undoubtedly a complex situation and challenging job. And when I asked what he missed most about being in government he said he's really enjoying being outside of government, and indeed, perhaps a little bit freer to speak than those who are currently working in the State Department.

He has also worked in the private sector and with the military as well as with the Department of State.

We've asked each of our panelists to talk for 10 or 15 minutes. We'll talk with the humanitarian situation and then look at some of the political issues around what happens next in Syria. And then the three of us will have a little conversation, and you're free to ask each other questions, before we open it up to everyone.

So, welcome to our speakers and welcome to all of you, and we'll start with you, Panos.

MR. MOUMTZIS: Thank you. Thank you very much, and good afternoon, everybody. Thank you very much for inviting me to start with and to all of you for coming to listen.

I've just arrived in D.C. from Jordan, where I've been, in the last few days, looking at the situation there, but then before answering the humanitarian situation, I just want to say that my comments today are obviously going to be clearly on the humanitarian situation.

As humanitarian actors, we feel very strongly, as you know, about adhering to the humanitarian principles, which means that we try to work with everybody, we try to intervene where people are in need regardless of any political situation, and therefore, our neutrality and independence is extremely important in terms of being able to work and operate.

Today I'm here to talk about the impact of the Syria humanitarian situation. The main focus was going to be on the neighboring countries, but obviously I will touch base on inside Syria, and maybe I'll start very briefly with inside Syria, a country where I lived up until 2009, as where I was director for the UN Relief and Works program for the Palestinian refugees inside Syria.

The situation in Syria today is really, as you know, very complex. I would say actually Syria is one of the most complex and dangerous conflicts in the world as of 2013. It's rapidly deteriorating. We saw it deteriorating significantly in 2012 and the situation right now, unfortunately, doesn't look any better.

At the moment inside Syria, the United Nations has a program of assisting four million Syrians inside the country, half of whom, two million, are internally displaced. The other two are people in need who are in the areas where they remain today.

We have an operation in Damascus. Actually, Damascus has been one of the very hospitable capitals hosting Iraqi refugees for a number of years, and also Palestine refugees who have been there, their population in the country has been really very much doing the right things with regards to the refugees, and it's sad, of course, to see the rapid deterioration that we are seeing today.

At the regional level, today, we have registered or assisting about 620,000 Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries, and this includes refugees in Jordan, in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Turkey, and in Egypt. There are also a number of them who have gone to North Africa, to European countries, and the movement is continuing further afield.

This means that if we put together the four million people in

need inside Syria plus one million refugees, which is our planning figure in 2013 up until June 2013, that means that we're talking about over five million people affected. This is a quarter of the population in Syria. It's one in four being included in a program that is in place at the moment to address the humanitarian needs on the ground.

At this point, we're still receiving 2,000 to 3,000 Syrian refugees crossing the borders on a daily basis. This is a significant number because that means that every week, basically we have to think of an additional 10,000, 20,000 people having gone, that's almost like planning for another city in terms of refugees moving.

The majority of the refugees are being hosted by what we call host communities or outside camps. Actually, 30 percent of the refugees in the region are in camps, 70 percent are in -- we call them urban settings or many of them are in villages, but basically in non-camp situations.

Seventy-five percent of the refugees are women and children, actually, half of them are children. This is a children's crisis. It's a refugee children's crisis. One is overwhelmed every time on the border to really see the impact in the number of particular families that are coming over, but also this is not a question of numbers. I've mentioned several numbers.

I think what is really -- what strikes as the biggest worry is the question of protection of civilians inside the country, and what we hear, when one stands at the border and sees the refugees arriving, is the most horrendous stories of survival, of fleeing insecurity, fleeing for their lives and coming to safety under the most extraordinary situations and conditions that one sees on the ground.

I'll never forget meeting the Syrian mother who had one son on each hand and kept them waiting at the border for the third one to arrive. Actually, he never made it to the border. So, there's a lot of really tragedy and a lot of very sad situations on the ground as we're working at the borders.

Talking of the borders, the first most important priority for us as humanitarian actors is really to ensure that the borders remain open, and so far, I think the credit goes to the neighboring countries for continuing to receive and to allow refugees to cross. This is Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq. The only one border point that is closed at this point is the Al-Qa'im border point to Iraq. We hope that this will change. We have made approaches to the government of Iraq, because it's extremely important that civilians, refugees, people who flee insecurity to be able to reach in safety.

Also, the principle of non-refoulement, respecting the

principle of non-refoulement ensuring that no Syrian refugee is sent back against their own will, and that's pretty much adhered and respect at the time.

I want to say a few words about the tremendous generosity of the neighboring host countries, really, the fact that they keep the borders open, but also the host communities in the neighboring countries who really opened their homes to receive Syrians. I was in Lebanon, and some of the families I visited, these are families who are very poor themselves, they barely make ends meet, and yet they will open their home to receive a Syrian refugee family or to host them in their living room and to share whatever means they have.

This is also applied, of course, to the governments opening the infrastructure in terms of health, in terms of education, sharing water resources, sharing resources that are scarce and still having this tremendous generosity to continue receiving people as they cross the border.

A few weeks ago we released our humanitarian plan for the first six months of the year, and this plan has four priorities that I want to go very quickly, highlighting what we see as the most important challenge, but also issues that we want to put together on the ground.

This plan, and the four priorities, is a result of a discussion

we have had with 55 organizations. UNHCR, the UN High Commission for Refugees, is the lead agency in terms of coordinating and talking with everybody on the ground, working with UN agencies, working with NGOs, and the four priorities is the result of the collective consultation and planning when we looked for 2013.

Our first priority is protection. It's really looking at, first and foremost, the question of open borders, but also registration, and in 2013 we're expanding, we're opening additional registration facilities to ensure that every Syrian outside the country is able and has an easy process to register and qualify for assistance, protection, and ensure that they're legal where they are.

We have put a particular focus on issues of GBV, sexual and gender based violence and child protection, and I saw today also the IRC, the International Rescue Committee, released their very important report presenting also their findings on some of the most vulnerable issues that we also share and view in the area. So, working together with UNICEF, with Save the Children Fund, but also with other partners, there is a particular focus right now with the strengthening of protection staff, wanting to make sure that we are more accessible, but also there are appropriate programs to address the needs of women and children, many of whom are indeed victims of sexual-based violence, but also victims,

obviously, of the conflict there.

UNICEF, in particular, has put a program that is tailor made on education but also through child friendly spaces and support to children. Many of the refugee children who arrive, the parents report there are issues with bed wetting, withdrawal, not communicating, and of course the children having witnessed some of the most horrific and dramatic experiences in the country.

A second area of priority is the ongoing crisis with the new arrivals in the new camps. On a daily basis, when we receive 2,000 to 3,000 refugees, this is really an emergency, which from our side means that we have to make sure that from the moment the refugees arrive, that they have a safe place to stay, a roof above their head, food, medical, water, the basic life saving assistance has to be provided to them, and this is while -- I mean, everyday we have to -- basically to catch up to make sure that the people who have arrived have received, if they're in a camp, the tent or the blankets or whatever it is. This continues day in, day out.

We actually have put 24-hour shifts in some of the operations, which means that we have a nightshift, we have relief workers going to work at night, at 8:00 o'clock p.m. who stay until the morning because refugees arrive on a 24-hour basis, and most of them actually cross through non-official border points to flee to safety.

So, the ongoing support to new arrivals, including construction of new camps, is extremely important. Many of you would have followed the news on Zaatari Camp, which is, of course, one of the most publicized camps in the region located in Jordan or right at the border. I just came back from Zaatari camp in the last few days and it is, indeed, a challenge. One has to build and support these people living under extraordinary conditions.

A third priority is the emergency preparedness. I'm afraid that we're worried, as humanitarian workers, that we don't know what will come next. We very much hope to see peace and stability and a political solution, because clearly the humanitarian action is not the solution to the problem, it has to be a political solution.

But while we're not seeing any light at the end of the tunnel, at least not for now, we have to prepare to be able to support, should there be more significant waves of refugees. At the moment, our planning is to support 1.1 million refugees in the coming months with the worst-case scenario preparing for up to 1.85 million refugees in the neighboring countries. And this includes repositioning, preparing repositioning humanitarian assistance, buying in advance blankets, tents, looking at the neighboring countries, and making sure that should there be more significant waves or outflow, that we are ready and we're able to respond

in an effective and in a rapid manner to address the needs on the ground.

Fourth priority, and I have not presented them in any order. I'm not sure if I will be able to put any order because they're all very important, but a fourth priority is a support to what we call urban refugees, refugees who are outside camp settings, and the last few months there's been a lot of priority on camps because people, when they arrive and they're in a camp, we need to be able to respond to that, but now we are refocusing and expanding the program of support to refugees in urban centers.

This means that we are putting in place now a more robust community outreach program. We're hiring among the refugee community women, but also men, to be able to go out to where the refugees are in the villages and the border areas and towns and to be able to support and address in a better way their needs. This includes a rolling out of a cash assistance program, a program where many of the refugees these days, they would get like a credit card where they could go to an ATM machine and receive some cash support to be able to deal with paying the rent or addressing some of the most urgent needs that they have on the ground.

So, this is in a nutshell the priorities we have. The most important challenge we have faced the last week has been the weather. I was actually in Jordan where for a week; Jordan has received the

equivalent of two-thirds of the annual rainfall. It was really a dramatic situation where many areas were flooded, not just in the camps, but also throughout the country and even the Jordanian army had to go out to support people in need. And of course on our side, Zaatari camp, but also the other areas, was quite dramatic trying to respond to the needs on the ground.

And this one week of heavy rainfall was followed by 48 hours of a snowstorm and where really pretty much in Jordan but also in the region life came to a halt. I'm glad that at least we didn't have any dramatic deaths or any extreme situation, but it's pretty miserable if you're a refugee in the camp, sleeping under a tent with the temperature being below zero.

We have responded the best we can, providing heaters, insulating the tents, providing blankets, looking at the food calorie intake, doing everything possible to respond to -- to alleviate or to lighten the difficulty of being in these miserable situations for there, but the bottom line remains that it is a difficult place where they are.

The crisis in Syria has also had an impact, first of all, on the Iraqi refugees in Syria. Tens of thousands of Iraqis or possibly over 50,000 have returned back to Iraq, and there is a continuous movement of Iraqis returning. There is a program in Iraq put in place by the government of

Iraq to support them where they are. There are some Iraqi refugees who do remain in Damascus and other areas.

And lastly, the Palestinian refugees, there is about half a million Palestinian refugees who have been very generously hosted in Syria for several -- I think for 60 years, for several decades. They are now in a very vulnerable situation. The UN Relief and Workers Agency for Palestine Refugees is the lead agency that supports them and responds to their needs. Some of them, more than 10,000 Palestinian refugees, have crossed the borders into Lebanon and most of them are hosted by host communities in the camps there and about two and a half thousand have gone into Jordan. But most of the Palestinians have actually been internally displaced within the country.

Yarmouk camp, which is practically a suburb of Damascus, has been seriously affected and the Palestinians themselves have been caught up in the middle of this conflict where they are. So that -- which adds a lot more to the complexity, of course, of the situation.

A key concern we have in the region is the political stability of the region itself, and each of the host neighboring countries has a sensitivity or a vulnerability. Jordan, there are elections on the 24th of January. With the political polarization and the refugee topic is pretty much on the political agenda. We're grateful that Jordan maintains the borders

open and pretty much allows access with the full cooperation of the government on the ground, but one has to recognize an internal vulnerability that exists there.

Lebanon, there is a huge insecurity. We have seen the fighting and the tensions in Tripoli, the bomb explosion in Beirut, in Sirt. The Lebanese politics, the mosaic of politics is so complex, our objective as humanitarian workers with all the partners is to be able, if you want to maneuver through all of this, and to ensure access and continuation of the humanitarian needs while being very savvy of the political complexity and ensuring there's the right balance that sometimes really feels like walking through a very narrow path, wanting to make sure that this balance is maintained throughout.

Turkey has been extremely generous in terms of providing what we call five-star plus response through proper owned government funds to support the needs of the refugees. There are 14 camps in Turkey, tremendous generosity, and support given to them. And in Iraq we see primarily the Kurds, who have gone to the northern parts of Iraq, Kurdish Syrians who continue to cross and move into these areas.

So, while we're working in a tremendous vulnerable area, politically sensitive, with an unknown future in terms of how things will go, what we want to make sure is that we have prepared in terms of to

respond for the actual crisis, and this brings me to the very last point, which is really the question of funding. We launched an appeal late December for the first six months of the year, it's still the beginning of the year. At the moment we have received pledges in the range of 6 percent.

We are at this time of the year where we're about to sign agreements and put in place plans to support the refugees with our NGO partners, with the humanitarian community, and it's extremely important to have early funding and flexible funding at the beginning of the year.

The U.S. government has been tremendously generous in supporting so far with the plans they have had last year and the discussions that we have at the moment. We're also looking at broadening the group of supportive governments by including nontraditional actors. On the 30th of January there is a Kuwait conference that is being hosted with the GTC member states and we would like very much to engage the Gulf cooperation member states in working closer -- in closer coordination and support to address the humanitarian needs.

The funding is crucial and we feel that at the moment that the speed with which the humanitarian crisis is deteriorating is greater than the ability of the traditional donors to respond to the financial needs. We are day in, day out, at the border supporting the refugees as they cross and we need to have the means. And when I say "we", I want to

highlight the tremendous role, first and foremost, I would say, by the non-governmental organizations. They have been fantastic in the way we have worked together hand in hand to deliver the humanitarian need, but also the UNICEF, World Food program, the UN agency's partners that in this difficult time of the crisis, our -- first of all, having a good coordination, a good team spirit, clear directions, vision, priorities, strategic planning and moving together is crucial because none of us is able to respond alone, and by joining hands we will better be able to respond.

Thank you very much. Maybe I'll stop it here.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you very much, Panos, for a very, somewhat sober, assessment of what's happening. For me it's actually quite terrifying to think if there are 620,000 refugees now, you're talking about a planning figure of 1.1 million, worst case scenario of 1.85 -- that's three times the present number, and you look at how the system right now is overstretched.

What happens to refugees depends very much on what happens inside Syria. So, perhaps that's a good segue to you, Fred, to talk about, what is going to happen in Syria?

MR. HOF: That's actually a very good question. Thanks very much for inviting me and, Panos, it's an honor to share the stage with you. The work you're doing is extraordinarily important and it certainly merits

the support of all in the international community. I know the United States -- you know, the American taxpayer has not been AWOL in all of this, particularly on the humanitarian front, and I certainly wish you the best in your fundraising efforts for this very important initiative and I trust you'll get the full support of the United States government in this.

I think the central point I'd like to make right up front about what's likely to happen in Syria is drawn very much from one of your central conclusions. You're talking about the contingency planning you're doing, the worst-case basis, 1.8 million refugees. Now, I, you know, truth in advertising, I know nothing about the science of how one would project a certain refugee population, but I would say that Syria, on the trajectory it is on right now, will easily produce 1.8 million refugees before long, and perhaps even go beyond that.

Panos' assessment was very sobering and I suspect you'll be tempted to classify mine along the same lines. I don't want to be overly alarmist, but what I see is a country headed for systemic state failure. I can see authority in Syria collapsing across the board. And this isn't just because of happenstance, this isn't just because of accidents, this isn't just because of the luck of the draw. It's because of a very deliberate strategy that's being implemented, what I refer to as the poison pill strategy.

What is being employed in Syria today by the regime is an avowedly sectarian poison pill, one which is saying, in essence, to the people of Syria, the price for the removal of this family business is the destruction of the country. That's what makes this such a catastrophe on a humanitarian basis, a catastrophe likely to grow, I'm afraid, exponentially in the future unless something can be done to bring the curtain down on current circumstances.

What we've seen from relatively early in this crisis is a regime bent on trying to implicate the entirety of the community from which it comes in the behavior, and if you will, the crimes of the family business.

I think what we saw in the recent performance of President Assad in the opera house, was basically a reaffirmation of this strategy. President Assad was basically telling his followers, don't worry about the status of the family, don't worry about being left holding the bag here. We are here for the duration. We will fight this out. There are basically no Syrians among the opposition, they're all foreigners, they're all terrorists, they're all criminals, and they're run by foreign masters. We won't negotiate with them, we'll negotiate with their masters.

I think the central point here, though, was President Assad trying to tell the people who he is implicating in his strategy that he's going to hold on and the ramifications of that are very serious indeed.

What we've seen from the beginning with the insertion of militiamen, auxiliaries, into villages and towns basically under the control of the opposition, we've seen massacres that have increased the sectarian flavor of this and it's provoking a reaction. And I think if I were to try to boil down the current strategy of President Assad into very few words, it would be this: he is hoping that over time the extremist elements among the armed opposition come to dominate the armed opposition so that this will be a fight between the Syrian regime and people affiliated one way or the other with al Qaeda.

At that point, President Assad, I think, will try to resell himself to the West as the answer to terrorism. The key to this strategy is holding on to Damascus, and this is why you're seeing such an upsurge in fighting over the last few days in the suburbs of Damascus.

Now, Panos mentioned the necessity of a political solution. I think almost everybody in this room can agree as a matter of principle that if there were a way to bring the curtain down on this situation politically, through some kind of a peaceful, managed transition, this would definitely be the way to go.

Bringing an end to the nightmare afflicting 22.5 million Syrians and countless millions of people in the surrounding countries in the neighborhood is obviously very important. I think, though, in all

honesty, we have to come to the conclusion that the prospects for a peaceful, managed transition are not very good. Perhaps not impossible, but very low odds.

Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN Arab League Special Envoy who replaced Kofi Annan a few months ago, is trying his level best, and it's -- I think it's been, from his point of view, a very interesting experience. When he took over from the former Secretary General, at first he tried to devise a new approach. After all, Kofi Annan had fallen short. Brahimi thought that perhaps there was something different he could try in bringing about a peaceful, managed transition in Syria.

In the end, he came full circle to what may have been Kofi Annan's final diplomatic triumph, and that was the agreement reached in Geneva on the 30th of June last year. And I think it's important to focus on that a bit because, as I said, Brahimi has come full circle back to this agreement.

You have the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council agreeing on the outline of a process whereby a transitional governing mechanism, something like a national unity government, would receive full executive powers from the regime. This mechanism would be created on the basis of negotiations between a team designated by Assad and a team representing the opposition. They would

create this mechanism on the basis of mutual consent; each would have a veto on nominees of the others.

The important thing being that this mechanism would receive from the regime full executive powers. Everybody signed up to this. The agreement, for all practical purposes, lasted about 20 minutes. President Assad made it clear to Kofi Annan that he would not take any of the steps required of him to turn down the heat inside Syria. Assad made it very clear to Kofi Annan, we already have a national unity government here, we don't need any kind of a transitional governing mechanism.

And then, of course, the United States and Russia got into this enormous food fight in the Security Council over another chapter seven Security Council draft. So, that agreement has been submerged. Brahimi, as I said, has come full circle. He has come back to that agreement. He is trying, and most recently, I believe it was on Friday that there was a meeting in Geneva, our Deputy Secretary of State, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Brahimi, sitting down, trying to figure out how to bring about this transitional governing mechanism.

Now, I understand that the one conclusion Brahimi has come to that would indicate a slight change from the -- actually, a significant change from the procedure envisioned back in June, is that he has concluded that since June, there's been too much water over the dam, too

much blood in the streets to expect negotiations to produce this outcome, in other words, all Syrian negotiations.

So, he seems to have in mind some kind of procedure whereby the United States and Russia would agree on a transitional governing mechanism, perhaps try to sell it to the UN Security Council, and then present it to Assad.

Now, the key thing, I think, to keep in mind here is that even if all this works in terms of U.S., Russian, and Security Council consensus, Bashar al-Assad will still have the vote at the end of the day, whether or not he is going to consent to this procedure, because even though the procedure does not hold out his resignation or departure as a precondition, I think it's a pretty safe bet that if he actually gets into the business of transferring full executive power, he will not be hanging around Syria for very long.

Now, as I indicated, I think unfortunately the chances of this working are almost nil.

I think the safest and, perhaps, very regrettable analytical conclusion in all of this is that the course of events in Syria are going to be dictated by combat on the ground in Syria. I personally take no joy in coming to that particular conclusion.

I got my start in this business, so to speak, as a 16-year-old

exchange student in Damascus. Watching this country being torn apart, hearing today from members of my Syrian family who are living in terror, who have a sense of absolute uncertainty about what's next for their country, these things evoke very strong personal feelings. I'd like to see this ended sooner rather than later.

I'd like to see President Assad take the kind of steps that recognize, as Mr. Brahimi said a few days ago, that perhaps 40 years is long enough for a family business. Perhaps it's time to move on because time is the greatest of enemies in Syria. The longer this goes on, the more sectarian it becomes, the greater the chances we are looking at a total state collapse. God only knows what that is actually going to look like on the ground, but I think the results are likely to be of a quality in Syria and in the surrounding countries that unfortunately, Panos, are going to keep you in business for many, many years.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you. Well, that was also a sobering perspective. Let me ask you, Fred, what can the U.S. do in this situation? Is there a role for the United States? And then I'm going to ask you a question, Panos, before we open it up.

MR. HOF: Well, I would say that by definition, given our position in the international constellation, there has to be a fairly significant role for the United States. I think the challenge before the Administration

right now, and I would wager that this is causing a lot of midnight oil to be burned in government buildings around Washington, State Department, Defense Department, National Security staff, intelligence community, is what is to be done. If one agrees with the analytical conclusion that the near-term, mid-term, and perhaps, long-term course of Syria is going to be determined by people on the ground bearing weapons, okay, it is perfectly understandable to me, and I think it's perfectly clear, that the President of the United States is not eager to jump into this particular arena.

In a sense, he's getting the worst of all worlds right now. American influence over the new supreme military council and its constituent units is not very great because we are not in that arena. At the same time, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and the regime, all insist that the United States is in that arena.

I had the experience of watching a Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister a couple of weeks ago on television assure his audience that -- this was in the context of the recent chemical weapons controversy -- assure his audience that the United States was providing chemical weapons to Syrian rebels and that we were setting the stage for a major cover up in Syria.

So, the President's getting the worst of both worlds on this and I think that if the analytical conclusion is correct, then the main choice

before the Administration right now is whether or not to get into the arena, to work with the military, with the armed side of the Syrian opposition, to try as best it can to influence winners and losers by, in the first instance, trying to dominate the logistical system by which arms enter Syria from the outside, bearing in mind, however, that the greatest source of weaponry for the opposition is inside Syria.

MS. FERRIS: Thanks. If indeed this conflict drags on for a long time, if it worsens, as you seem to imply, Fred, what are the implications for refugees when you have --protracted situations we know in the Middle East can last far longer than anybody expects at the beginning of a crisis?

MR. MOUMTZIS: Well, obviously the implications are quite grim. I think what is different with the Syrian refugees, if I compare with Iraqis or with other refugee situations, is that the Syrian refugees, from the moment they cross the borders and even while they're in the camps, they all tell us, we really want to go back as soon as the situation allows.

You know, talking to the farmers in Jordan who have come out from the Daraa area in southern Syria are talking to the refugees in Lebanon or the neighboring countries, there is this urge to return. However, the political scenario that we just heard inside Syria makes us all wonder how long this will go for.

We are, at the moment, we're planning, in terms of humanitarian assistance, for six, twelve months at a time, but clearly, depending on what happens in Syria, we may see a scenario where even if there is, let's say, some magic political solution, the most likely scenario is that the refugees will not all rush back right away. Most of them will have kind of a wait and see. Maybe the head of the family, maybe one person will go to check on the house, and possibly in our planning, maybe up to 10 or 30 percent may go back if there is a political solution. But this requires security stability and a feeling of safety for people to go back.

So, the prospect for a quick answer at the moment is not there, which puts tremendous pressure on us as humanitarian actors, but also to the international community to continue supporting it until such time as there is a breakthrough that would return. But also when people go back, there's going to be a tremendous need for reconstruction, for fixing, for example, homes in Hamah or parts of the country, which has been affected. And so the work ahead is really tremendous, whichever way we look at it.

MR. HOF: May I just add something to that? I think this is -- this is an extraordinarily important point. I think we need to keep in mind, and I risk stating the obvious here, that the end of the regime, whether it comes from a force of arms or a peaceful, managed transition, is far from

the end of the story in Syria. The amount of destruction, physical, the amount of psychological and political stress that has been placed on a society, which, since 1946 had actually been making some progress, who knows, some of it illusory, perhaps, but some of it real, in developing a sense of national unity, in developing a country where citizenship, at least in theory, at least on paper, reigned supreme over other forms of identification, whether sectarian or ethnic or gender or any of these things.

Panos mentioned reconstruction. I know that my government has been doing a tremendous, unbelievable amount of planning, taking a look at what is going to be required in post-Assad Syria. Now, I don't want to make anybody nervous. I'm not suggesting that the American taxpayer is necessarily going to be tied directly to the reconstruction of Syria, but just looking at the sheer volume of work that's been done on this, and I think it's important to keep in mind that no matter what anybody plans to do, the best of plans for post-Assad Syria, two things are going to have to be present in spades. One is, security. Opening the country up to the United Nations humanitarian assistance system is good in principle. Without basic security, very, very, very hard to implement.

The other thing that's going to need to be present is money, and I can't emphasize this enough. It's going to be very, very difficult for the usual suspects, the international financial institutions, to do their

planning, do their assessment needs, mobilize resources, when a new Syrian government is going to have to be demonstrating to its constituents within days or weeks that things are improving, that things are getting better.

Now, the last meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People group in Morocco, at the tail end of the chairman's conclusions there was a reference to some kind of an interim reconstruction fund that ought to be established, okay, and what I certainly hope is happening in my government and in other governments interested in doing something in post-Assad Syria, I hope this fund is being established and -- at least for the restoration of the central services, and I hope it's on the verge of being seeded with some real money.

MS. FERRIS: Thanks. Let me ask just one more question and then we'll open it up for further discussion, so be getting your questions ready. Panos, you mentioned the extraordinary generosity of neighboring countries and welcoming refugees and enabling them to stay even when they're also concerned about the political consequences. What more could the international community do to ensure that those borders stay open? What would be necessary?

And then, Fred, I'll ask you a similar question about the regional implications of the growing sectarian conflict in Syria and the

continuing humanitarian crisis, but Panos first.

MR. MOUMTZIS: Well, the continuation of a sign of solidarity from the international community to the host governments is extremely important. It's really vital that the government of Jordan, of Lebanon, of Turkey, of Iraq, of Egypt, of the neighboring host countries feel like they're not alone in this, because what we have seen, if I look with Turkey, for example, is of course, support has to be given to the Syrians there because also we see even a second removement going from Turkey to Cyprus, Greece. Actually, Syrian asylum seekers are becoming the third or second largest group -- nationality of asylum seekers in European countries.

And these host governments indeed, despite internal political pressures, and despite the fact that actually they are not -- I mean, financially they have their own internal challenges, they still continue to have the borders open to open up their infrastructure and facilities to host and assist refugees where they are.

The government of Lebanon issued its own appeal. The government of Jordan has done the same. The government of Turkey has expressed its willingness to receive international support. So, although as humanitarian actors, the UN agencies and NGOs, we are doing everything we can to address the needs on the ground, there are -- these

governments have also put their own appeals and therefore international support to this government appeal is extremely important to demonstrate that indeed they're not alone.

I don't think we can take the host governments for granted and I think we are concerned and want to see a continuation of the open border approach because it's vital for civilians, for refugees who feel insecure in their homes, at least to feel that there is a place for those of them who will reach the border to be able to cross that border and to be received on the other end.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you. And, Fred, regional implications of what's happening in Syria?

MR. HOF: Well, I --

MS. FERRIS: In 60 seconds or so.

MR. HOF: Oh, sure. Well, I think we can -- I think we can derive a lot of the answer to that question from what Panos just said about the impact of what we face right now, these finite numbers we're dealing with now that can expand exponentially. A Turkish friend told me not long ago, he said, Fred, he said, my greatest fear is over time Turkey becomes a sort of Pakistan to Syria's Afghanistan.

Now, I haven't parsed exactly what that means, but I think you get the drift. You know, there's some alarm. The strains on a

Lebanese system are incredible. I mean, there seems to be basically a consensus among the key leaders in Lebanon right now to try to keep the lid on things as much as possible.

There are a variety of motives there. The reason Hassan Nasrallah wants to keep the lid on is different from the reason the President or the Prime Minister want to keep the lid on. Jordan, on top of the refugee burden, Jordan is extremely concerned about the poison pill strategy, about the determination of the Syrian regime to turn this into an avowedly sectarian struggle that will, if Assad plays his cards correctly, will push the al Qaeda lookalikes to the front of the line on the opposition side and the implications that could have for Jordan over time.

MS. FERRIS: Okay. Thank you. Let's open it up for discussion. We'll start here and take three or four. Tamaran, if you'll introduce yourself and there should be a microphone coming here. We'll do one, two, three, four, and then we'll go to this side.

SPEAKER: Beth, thanks, and first let me thank both of you so much for joining us today and, Beth, thank you for the partnership between Saban and IDP in putting this event together.

I find it very useful to look at these issues together, the humanitarian dimension, as it evolves, and particularly the issue of displacement and how that relates to the politics and I'd like to pick up,

Fred, on what seems to be an implication of what you were saying about Assad's poison pill strategy.

If that's his strategy, and if, as you say, he has the final vote, then it seems to me the arena for -- or the fruitful direction, if you will, for political influence, if we can try to shape things, is the connection between Assad and the Alawi community. And so I want to ask you, to what extent you think there is room to alter that dynamic. And Panos, it seems to me if you read the news over the last couple days, in particular, Alawites in Syria are voting with their feet on this question, of how they feel about Assad's strategy hanging on to the last moment and trying to hang on to Damascus. They're leaving Damascus, according to the news reports, and going up into the mountains.

So, I'd love your sense, first off, are those news reports accurate? Is that what we see happening to the Alawi community? And, Fred, what, if anything, can be done to try and disentangle?

MS. FERRIS: Okay, and then we have this gentleman right here. If you want to stand up and introduce yourself, please.

MR. EVANS: Hi, good afternoon. My name is Idris Evans. I'm with the Public International Law and Policy Group, and I think my question is best directed at Mr. Moumtzis. What do you find, in your estimation, if the conflict continues into this year and there are more than

1.8 million refugees and internally displaced people, how will UNHCR have to change its strategy in dealing with these effected people?

MS. FERRIS: Okay, and then we have Kathleen and then the gentleman behind her, and then we'll give you a chance to respond.

MS. NEWLAND: Thank you. Kathleen Newland from the Migration Policy Institute, and I would like to ask Mr. Hof if he could explain a little bit more about the remaining supporters of Assad. Does it extend beyond the Alawite community? And, if so, who is with him still? And a slightly related question to Panos, since you know the Palestinian community in Syria so well, I wonder if you could say a little bit about, apart from the Yarmouk camp, you know, how they are affected? And do you have any sense of what their expectations are in the immediate future? Thank you.

MS. FERRIS: Okay, and then the gentleman right -- yes.

SPEAKER: Hi, I'm Harley Gadomski I attend Ohio Valley University through the Washington Center. I have a question for Panos. With the rise in number of refugees and necessity for more money, with that, and since the U.S. has quite a significance in contributions, and with our scare of a possible default within this year within our United States and the government, how big of an impact will that have on our contribution to you? And would you go to public or private organizations

after that if need be?

MS. FERRIS: Okay, we've got a variety of questions here beginning with the Alawites, the relationship with Assad, who is supporting him, questions about the Palestinians inside Syria, whether or not your policy would change UNHCR if the conflict drags on and the number of refugees increases, and if you'd like to comment on the relationship between these demands and the U.S. domestic economic situation, quickly. Yes.

MR. HOF: Okay. Tammy, I would say that the ability of the United States of America to sort of micromanage intra-Alawite affairs is somewhat limited, okay. There are a lot of ironies here. President Assad and his team have indeed tried to make this entire community incriminated by its actions and its crimes.

One of the ironies is that President Assad and his family have all but seceded from this community, both socially and economically, over the years. The Alawite community remains the poorest community in Syria. It's about 12 percent of the population. Alawites have contributed enormously to the building of a Syrian state, and in the best of all possible worlds, in a citizenship-based system, they will continue to do so as Syrian citizens.

I think in this case, given the operational limitations of the

United States on, you know, trying to jump into the middle of this kind of confessional situation, I think the burden fairly or unfairly falls on the Syrian opposition.

There are Alawites within the opposition, but I think -- I think in a broader sense what the opposition has to start looking at now, the new opposition coalition and the new supreme military council, is moving as quickly as possible toward the establishment of a provisional government ideally on Syrian territory, a provisional government that will feature some Alawite members, a provisional government that will try to project a reassuring image to Syrians, in general, and if I may, I mean, it leads directly into one of the other question -- the other question is, yeah, who's opposed to Assad these days. Well -- or who's with him -- sorry, who's with him? I would say, based on my own unscientific sample, which includes some of the -- my closed Syrian friends, people who I have known for the better part of 40 years and beyond, I would say the following: Nobody in Syria -- nobody, not even Bashar al-Assad has any illusions about the incompetence, the corruption, and the brutality of this regime.

There are no illusions about that. What people do fear -- not just minorities, not just Alawites, Christians, but Sunni Muslims, for example, in the business community, what they do fear is the unknown.

They know they have a crooked and rigged system. They know they have a system that encourages the best and the brightest of Syria to go to places like Canada, the United States, Australia, the UK, to pursue their futures, to raise their families. They know what's wrong. They're fearing what's next.

When they turn on their television and they get, you know, a clip from Al Jazeera of some opposition character, some, you know, some al-Nusra front person waving a rifle, screaming slogans, this makes them nervous.

It's the job, first and foremost, of the Syrian opposition to address those concerns and to do so in a relentlessly consistent way. It seems obvious. It's not easy. This is a political culture that's been coming out of an induced coma lasting almost 50 years.

We Americans are very good at giving Dutch uncle advice to the Syrian opposition. Come on, show some teamwork. You know, submerge these personal disputes. Trust one another. You have to take into account what's happened to Syrian society over the last 50 years and it's not just the Assad regime. Syria's first taste of a Muhaberat dominated political system, ironically, came under the Egyptians from '58 to '61. The Baathists learned a lot from Nasser's intelligence services, so we have to keep this in mind.

But ready or not, the opposition, I think, has to move in this direction.

MS. FERRIS: Panos?

MR. MOUMTZIS: Right. Starting with the first question, what I can say is at the moment when you register the refugees who flee, they will obviously look at where they're fleeing, why they have left, a number of questions that we ask, including their ethnic origin, and the vast majority, over 90 percent of those who have registered in all the neighboring countries are actually Sunnis.

We have seen increasingly, particularly in Lebanon, some people crossing from minorities including Christians and others, but we haven't really seen any significant border -- at least movement across the border from other -- from any of the minorities, but we are looking, indeed, at the composition, and particularly when we do contingency planning and we look at the various scenarios, we look into what may happen and how, basically, to support and how things could change -- be a change taking place.

The question of Idris on how would UNHCR change its strategy, I would say -- with regards to IDPs or refugees, with regards to internally displaced people, the response is led by the Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance, inside Syria. UNHCR is one of

the agencies which is also participating there and particularly on the protection questions but also the support to the internally displaced people, so I would not comment so much for the inside.

I would say for the outside, in terms of the refugees, which is a response which is led by UNHCR, what we're looking is basically to prepare, in the best possible way, in order to continue responding in an effective way to the outflow of refugees. Today, we are over 600,000. What would happen if it's a million, if it's 1.85 or more beyond, both in terms of ensuring -- reassuring those governments to maintain the borders open, because we strongly believe the respect of the right of asylum, and if somebody isn't safe and wants to cross a border, to be able to do that.

And then working with the partners, and this is where the coordination becomes really important, it's not just a word, but it's about bringing the best of everybody while working together according to the ability of the different partners while being inclusive in their approach to have, as I said, the UN agencies, the NGOs, the humanitarian actors, the national capacity that exists there, but really about also being strategic and making some tough decisions some times.

In some situations less is more, in some situations -- and we try to tailor make the response in terms of coordination and support in each country according also to the political sensitivities or dynamics that

exist there, which, believe me, is not always easy, but it's encouraging that even in the most polarized situations or politically divided, everybody has said the right thing with regards to asylum and to receiving or helping the refugees, and this is really encouraging, both in terms of access, in terms of space, and in terms of response on the ground.

Kathleen, you asked about the Palestinians, which is indeed a very vulnerable group in Syria and UNHCR I want to say up front that really the response to the Palestinians is led by UNRRA and that's a separate mandate and organization with whom we work very closely in terms of partnering. And so what I will say is more coming from UNRRA really -- from our partnership and discussion with them on the ground. There are 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, actually a third of them live in Yarmouk camp, which I understand many of them -- possibly most of them have actually been internally displaced from the Yarmouk camp.

Most of them are within Syria. Some of them have crossed to Lebanon, some of -- very few to Jordan. But it's an extremely vulnerable group. UNRRA has put together a contingency plan. They have also put together a response plan dealing with the Palestinians, which is far more complex, I would say, than with the Syrians because of the political dynamics and the fact that many of them are, of course, a second or third generation of Palestinian refugees who have been multiple times

displaced.

And given the internal division within the Palestinian community, within the current conflict and the fact that you have seen them on all sides, that makes them even more vulnerable in terms of where they are.

So, I understand that the moment UNRRA has opened schools or other infrastructure to host displaced people and they try to support them as best as they can within the community, and also UNRRA is quite stretched with the financial support to be able to deal and respond to the needs of the Palestinian refugees.

The question of -- the last question on funding, this is really quite important, our ability to be able to, at all times, have the means to provide the bare minimum lifesaving humanitarian assistance to people who arrive wearing -- bringing with them nothing but the clothes that they are wearing. We have seen refugees crossing bare feet, with summer clothes, and being entirely dependent on the international community's humanitarian support.

The government of Turkey, I would say, has been the most generous because also of their relatively better economic situation, to very generously respond to the refugee needs in the camps, that we actually often call them as a five star support. So, the remaining -- the rest of the

region is really significantly dependent in the refugees on the international support.

The worry we have in coming to the U.S., funding in particular, but also to, I would say, funding of many other countries is on two levels, one is there is a need to better engage the nontraditional actors, the Gulf or other states, to work together in terms of working on the same page sheet, if I can put it this way, ensuring that there is no duplication, we have the same objective and whatever generosity comes there, comes in a targeted way to also address this bare minimum, life saving assistance, because clearly, the funding that is there or the capacity, the international capacity, I'm not sure it can respond to a need of 600,000, a million or two million where the numbers could be a lot more important.

We're also concerned that at the moment the Syrian situation, which of course has a lot of international media attention and support from many governments politically, that the funding -- the humanitarian funding should not come to the expense of other operations, because if the humanitarian pie remains the same, and while we see a dramatic deterioration of the humanitarian situation on the Syria situation, there is a concern that whatever funding is dedicated for this operation may be to the expense of other needs around the world, and this is a

difficult decision to make, as I go around, and of course I would advocate for the support to be able to address this important need for the Syrian situation, but this should not come to the cost of others.

And this is where broadening the donor base, if possible, to receive -- to make sure that additional humanitarian funding is made by governments to address this need is really crucial. It's a very difficult question, but for all of us -- the NGOs, the UN humanitarians that are on the ground -- it's vital to be able to respond, to have the support as early as possible and as flexible as possible at the beginning of the year to be able to respond on a daily basis to these growing humanitarian needs.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you, Panos. Let's take three or four questions over here. How about one, two, three, four. And if you could introduce yourself, please.

SPEAKER: Sure. This is Ilhan Tanir from Turkish press. I'd like to ask quick two questions to Mr. Hof, since (inaudible) he has been with the government for about fifty months starting with the Syrian crisis.

My quick question, sir. This is going to be backward looking. During August 2011, President Obama came out and called on Assad to step down and this put great pressure on countries like Turkey to stay in contact with the Assad government and a couple months later, eventually, Turkey also called on Assad to step down.

My question is, nowadays in Washington, a lot of people are saying that the U.S. cannot solve all the problems around the world. Don't you think coming out that early and putting pressure on other countries to cut diplomacy with Assad, there is more responsibility for U.S. to do?

And second quick question, another point we have been hearing a lot that U.S. government has been unable to find the good guys on the ground regarding FSA. My personal experience, a year ago I was able to talk to FSA local leaders in Damascus and they have now Skyped since then. My question is, how is it that the U.S. government is still arguing that there is -- cannot find good guys to lead on the ground in terms of military? Thank you.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you. Next question. Yes, please.

SPEAKER: Hi, Bessma Momani here a fellow at Brookings and a professor at the University of Waterloo. My question is about the Syrian refugees that have not had an official camp in Lebanon. Has that, you think, in your opinion, effectively, as I would assume the Lebanese government wants to dissuade Syrian refugees from coming to Lebanon -- can you reflect on that?

And the second thing is, we know that the number of Syrian refugees is far higher than that has been officially announced for Jordan. Can you comment on whether or not that's because some assume they're

transitory going to other places? Or is there a reason why there are Syrians that do not want to register as refugees? If you could comment on some of the motivations for that.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you very much. Yes, did you have one?

MR. NAJAM: My name is Muhammad Najm from (inaudible) Beirut. I just came from Beirut a couple months ago. I just want to ask about the policy of the U.S. Like you were saying, Mr. Hof, that the U.S. are -- like the Assad is trying to play the West game, which is saying al Qaeda, but the U.S. two weeks ago called Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist group and he announced not to work with them, and we follow Twitter, we follow all the online platforms, and everybody is happy from what they're doing on the ground, which is really affecting on the U.S. policy in general, how do you --

MS. FERRIS: Okay, there was one other over here. Yes, this gentleman here. If you want to stand up.

MR. HARPER: I'm William Harper with Fairmont State through the Washington Center, and my question is for Mr. Hof.

If we follow the poison pill theory and the fact that it's approaching a systematic state failure, what are the chances that Syria could fall into a power vacuum situation and what would the implications for that be on the region?

MS. FERRIS: Okay, we've got a nice group of questions here. Did the U.S. government come out too early in terms of calling for Assad's departure? How do you find the good guys? Having a question of the lack of camps in Lebanon as a deterrent for future arrivals. Questions about a power vacuum. Who'd like to start? Panos, do you want to start?

MR. MOUMTZIS: We are delighted that there are no refugee camps in Lebanon. Actually, this is, for us, it's a lot better for the refugees if they're hosted within host communities rather than being in a camp. Camps, first of all, are much more expensive, but also it's more difficult for the refugees who they are where they are.

So, at the same time, of course, accommodation shelter is increasingly becoming a challenge in Lebanon as the numbers increase. Today, Lebanon has surpassed the 200,000 mark of registered refugees in the country and at the moment we have increased our capacity, we register up to 30,000 people a month and as registration increases, these numbers, we are going to see them go up a lot higher from there.

I do not think that there is a policy of the government of Lebanon, the Lebanese government to dissuade refugees from coming. On the contrary, all political parties and voices, despite the extreme political polarization with the Syria situation, in Lebanon, have supported the policy of helping and receiving refugees and this is whether they are at

the north area in Wadi Khalid or if they are in the Beqaa Valley. At the moment about a third of the refugees are in the north, a third in the Beqaa, and a third in the Beirut and southern areas.

In the last few weeks, a couple -- the last two weeks, actually, we have seen a change on the number of the place of origin of the Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon. Initially, we kept on seeing many refugees coming from homes -- Hama area or villages around the Lebanese border, now we are seeing an increasing number of Syrian refugees originating from Damascus or the greater Damascus area, and obviously, the place where the refugees originate when they cross is a clear indication of the level of insecurity of what is happening inside.

Egypt is the other country that does not have a camp, and all of them are in urban areas, in Cairo, Alexandria, in Damietta, in other places, and people are helped where they are, and this is where it's important for us, as humanitarian actors, to be able to adapt to the response to help refugees in urban settings in the best possible way, and this is where the cash assistance, education, health, and so on, comes in place, including support to host communities through community-based, quick impact projects, because it's very important that if a village, a Lebanese village, has received a number of Syrians, that obviously the school will need extra classrooms or the local clinic and so on and that's

important in terms of the response to be able to support them on the ground.

Now, the actual number of Syrian refugees, I would say, in all the countries, is higher than the ones that have registered with us, and there is a number of explanations for that. First of all, not all the Syrians want to come and register. Some of them will not need assistance, some of them have reasons that they would not. Increasingly we're seeing many refugees who have been in Jordan or even in Lebanon for some time who are increasingly coming over because their limited means are drying out, because the vulnerability is increasing, and because they need support so they can no longer support themselves and they come over to us for assistance from us.

We have, just to give you an indication, at the moment, UNHCR has registered about 180,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan. The government of Jordan estimate is that there are over 250,000. So, as registration increases, and we're up now setting up more mobile teams and strengthening the registration capacity, we hope that we will come to one number. Also I want to highlight the fact that not every Syrian outside the country is a refugee, and also not every refugee may be in need of assistance, so this is -- there is a qualification, there is information.

When we register people we also -- it's very important for us

to ensure, obviously, the due diligence in terms of who are we registering to ensure the civilian character of the refugees and to look at questions of protection and ensuring that this person is indeed a refugee, and that's extremely important in view of the need for transparency, providing humanitarian aid, from taxpayers around the world.

So, these are all questions that we go through as we respond to the ground.

Today there are 620,000 registered. The actual number of Syrian refugees is a lot greater than that. In Turkey there is an indication that there could be up to 70,000 urbans, the same in Egypt, the number that is being quoted by the government is a lot more significant.

So, as we are registering and our doors and offices and registration centers are open, with increased capacity, we would be getting closer and closer to the real number, but of course registration is one thing, an ability, having the financial means to respond, is also extremely important. And this is where we often -- or we have to do this difficult choice of supporting the most vulnerable of them, basically trying to identify the poorest of the poor to be able to see how to best support them.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you. And Fred.

MR. HOF: Yes. I've been asked a number of pointed

questions about U.S. government policy. I'll start by committing a little truth in advertising. I am no longer a U.S. government official, so please don't take what I have to say as the canonical position of the United States government.

My duties with respect to Syria came to an end in September.

However, some of the questions are semi-historical in nature and I can certainly comment on those with some degree of authority, I think.

On August 18, 2011, President Obama did indeed say that he had come to the conclusion that there was just no way Bashar al-Assad could be part of the solution in Syria and that therefore, President Assad should step aside.

Now, there are some people nowadays who are trying to parse, you know, is there a difference between "step down" and "step aside?" I'm here to tell you there is no difference between the two. I had no role in the creation of the language, but it was very clear to me what the President had in mind and as a serving officer of the United States government, my attitude at the time, because I can remember distinctly the President articulating those words, is that when the President of the United States says something like this, it's not an advisory opinion.

So, my job at that point was to try to contribute to the creation of a strategy that would lead to a stable transition in Syria, but a full transition, 100 percent transition with the end of this family clan regime.

With respect specifically to Turkey, I was in Turkey when Foreign Minister Davutoğlu made his final good faith effort to dissuade Bashar al-Assad from the catastrophic course he was on. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu really went out of his way, put his own reputation on the line, trying his level best to get Assad to change course. He came back, he had what he thought were some agreements, particularly with respect to the City of Hama, as I recall. He was double-crossed.

Prime Minister Erdoğan came to the conclusion that he should call for Assad to step down, not because he was pressured by the United States, not because the United States twisted his arm. Let me assure you, the Prime Minister of Turkey is quite capable of coming to his own decisions. He did, he did this on his own, and I think it was the proper decision.

Do we know who the good guys on the ground are? Again, truth in advertising. I don't know what I don't know. I've been out of this since September. In September this was still, I would say, this was still very much a work in progress because, look, if you're going to get into the

business of supplying arms, there are some really important implications here. You've got to know something about who's who. You've got to know something about end use.

There are -- specifically, you know, especially with certain kinds of arms, there are special concerns about proliferation. Take my word for it, this is not just a matter of writing an essay saying the United States should arm the Syrian opposition. Okay? Perhaps we should, perhaps the Administration will come to this conclusion, but I can guaranty you that if it does, the requisite homework will have been accomplished because this is not a trivial matter.

A question, I guess, is the United States sort of trimming its sails or putting on the brakes here and is the designation of the Nusra Front, an indication thereof. I hope I've fairly characterized your question.

Look, what I've written and what I sincerely believe is that the timing of the announcement on the Nusra Front was very unfortunate. This Administration takes some justifiable pride in its knowledge of strategic messaging, okay. In this case, I think a mistake was made, I think it was a big mistake, not because there was anything untruthful in the text of the designation, not because Nusra is not, in fact, a synonym for al Qaeda in Iraq, not because these people are not murderers who have a particular sectarian appetite.

All of these things are true in my view. Yeah, tactically, they're pretty damn good on the ground, yes, they have put together a pretty good civil military strategy for their relationships with Syrian civilians, okay, yes, they've shown some tactical competence.

But their presence in Syria is a vital lifeline to the Assad regime. Those in the Gulf, and I'm talking here primarily of private donors, who send money to these people, are doing Bashar al-Assad a major favor because they're not going to put an end to this regime, but what they do is enable Assad to have some degree of credibility when he turns to his own community, which he is trying to fully implicate, and says, see, the only thing -- the only thing -- between you and genocide at the hands of these people, is me.

The timing of the announcement was bad because it stepped all over what was happening the next day, which was the recognition by the United States of America of the new Syrian opposition coalition or council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. That announcement, its potential significance, was completely crowded off the media by the controversy generated by this particular designation.

Had the order been reversed or had there been an interval during which time the United States would be announcing some kind of really significant assistance to the new opposition council, I think it would

have been much better. But the facts of the designation, I believe, are correct.

MS. FERRIS: Thank you. I have one last question over here. Microphone.

SPEAKER: Thank you very much. Can I take your last question to --

MS. FERRIS: If you could identify yourself.

SPEAKER: Yeah. Mouzner Sleimanwith Al Mayadeen TV based in Beirut, Lebanon. You mentioned that the outcome will be dictated by the battle on the ground, so how you can see the balance -- how you see the balance of power on the ground, taken into consideration that you mention the Jabhat al-Nusra, who is affiliated or associated with al-Qaeda, is the one most organized militarily and effectively on the ground.

So, if the balance of power is toward -- tilting toward the regime, then what's the outcome then? Is it a matter of extending the suffering of the Syrian people, since we know the balance of power as existed right now?

MR. HOF: Thanks. That's an excellent question. I think, you know, most of the people I talk to who pay very, very, very close attention to the actual battle that's unfolded on the ground in Syria, see that there is

a broad sense of momentum in favor of the opposition broadly, and I think we have to acknowledge that the tactical proficiency of the Nusra Front is part of that.

I think the -- what I have described for a long time as the bubble of illusion in which President Assad has lived for quite a while, that bubble has burst, okay, regardless of what he had to say in the opera house the other day.

I don't think it's escaped his attention that the international airport outside of Damascus is basically shut down. I don't think it's escaped his attention that the road to that airport is periodically interdicted. It's not escaped his attention that the suburbs around Damascus are scenes of pitched battle.

If you look at the totality of the Syrian army, you'll see that most of it, the overwhelming majority of it, is on the sidelines, that the units that possess actual combat capability plus political reliability, it's a small percentage of the Syrian army, these units have to be deployed and re-deployed constantly. You know, recruiting sectarian militiamen, poor people, and basically arming them and saying, go take what you want, do what you want, that gives these units a measure of rest, but this is a one-way trip.

The problem -- the problem -- is nobody can really predict

how long this is going to last. If we were to wake up tomorrow morning to the headline that, for example, Bashar al-Assad has been killed or Bashar al-Assad has left for Latakia or left the country, I wouldn't be surprised, personally. If we were sitting here a year from now having essentially the same conversation, I wouldn't be surprised.

We just don't know. We can see what the general trend line is, but it's clear that Assad's top strategic priority right now is to hold Damascus as the sectarian struggle deepens in the hope that he can remarket himself to the West someday. The first part of that equation, I'm afraid, he's succeeding, the nature of the struggle. The second, I don't see happening under any circumstances, absolutely zero.

MS. FERRIS: Well, our time has come to an end. Thank you, both our panelists, and thanks to all of you for coming.

(Applause)

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CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2016