

“Moderate” Australian Imam Named in Syria Arms Trafficking Operation

By Chris Ray | Originally posted on [The Investigative Journal](#)

Above featured image of Fedaa Majzoub

A “Mainstream” Imam in Australia

Thousands of citizens from the West travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for al-Qaeda and ISIS – often in breach of their own countries’ foreign fighter laws. Lately, the spotlight has been on [followers of ISIS](#) who await their fate following the collapse of the caliphate. Others may have broken laws by contributing to the conflict away from the battlefield yet received little or no scrutiny. Fedaa Majzoub, nominally an Australian, is a case in point.

A major and problematic player in the Syrian drama, he has been almost forgotten until this year, with the publication of an explosive Turkish police report linking top officials in the Erdogan administration with an arms trafficking network headed by an al-Qaeda associate.

Written in 2012 and published by the Stockholm-based [Nordic Monitor](#) in January, the police report claims the network funnelled weapons from Libya to Syria via Turkey.

It alleges that an otherwise-unidentified Fedaa Majzoub was a member of the network and was also connected with two of Erdogan's senior advisors.

Fedaa Majzoub is a not-uncommon name and neither the police report nor Nordic Monitor identified Majzoub's nationality or roles outside the alleged arms network.



Above: Fedaa Majzoub

The Investigative Journal can reveal that Fedaa Majzoub is a prominent Australian imam who worked as a university lecturer in Sydney before becoming official spokesperson for the Syrian National Council (SNC), a rebel political front based in Turkey.

The police allegations against Dr Majzoub indicate the supposedly moderate SNC worked with al-Qaeda operatives. The allegations also suggest the SNC may have served as a bridge between the al-Qaeda network and senior Turkish officials.

Today, Dr Majzoub lives in Istanbul as a low-profile lecturer in the faculty of theology at Marmara University, where TIJ contacted him. In our interview via email and WhatsApp, he denied any involvement in arms trafficking. His statements are the only public comment by any of the 14 people named in the police report.

A decade ago, Syrian-born and educated Dr Majzoub was a high-profile imam regarded as one of Australia's leading Muslim scholars. He worked as an adjunct lecturer in Islamic studies at Charles Sturt University and served in the trusted role of [prison chaplain](#).

Dr Majzoub, now 51, was known as an advocate of [inter-faith dialogue](#) who "built bridges" with local police. He was a member of the Australian National Imams Council's Fatwa Board – which issues guidelines on Islamic law – and had a regular slot on [Islamic radio](#) tackling "contemporary issues and challenges facing Australian Muslims."

Dr Majzoub's comfort with contemporary Australian society was questionable, however. Though his family reportedly moved to Australia in 1985, when he was a teenager, he subsequently spent about 15 years studying and teaching at [Islamic universities](#) in Egypt, India and Syria.

In doing so, he was following in the footsteps of his father

Hassan, who was educated in Saudi Arabia before serving as an imam in the Latakia region of western Syria, Dr Majzoub's birthplace.

On returning to Australia, Dr Majzoub lived and worked in Sydney's western suburbs, which hold Australia's largest concentration of Muslim immigrants, and his English remains less than fluent.

His foreign religious studies may have equipped him with the knowledge and authority to preach at Australia's mosques but he sometimes seemed out of touch with Australian values: In 2009, he [described](#) a Sydney drug dealer and gang member, involved in the theft of military rocket launchers, as a "good father, husband and citizen".

In 2011, as Syria plunged into chaos and war, Dr Majzoub relocated to Turkey, which was turning into a support base for the rebellion against president Bashar al-Assad. Dr Majzoub soon emerged as spokesperson for the SNC, whose powerful foreign supporters initially included US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Emir of Qatar.

[Erdogan](#) also publicly backed the SNC while giving [covert support](#) to forces affiliated with al-Qaeda and later, ISIS. As former US vice president Joe Biden complained, Turkish authorities sent money and weapons to "anyone who would fight against Assad."

Though the SNC presented itself as the moderate face of the Syrian uprising it contained a powerful Islamist component including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The SNC served as the

political front for the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) – a label applied to a loose network of armed groups without a unified command structure.

Dr Majzoub shuttled between his home in Istanbul, rebel bases in northern Syria and peace conferences in the capitals of Europe. As the only Australian member of the SNC, he spoke at anti-Assad rallies in Sydney and Melbourne, where the Syrian president's imminent overthrow was widely predicted.

A [Sydney Morning Herald](#) reporter who came across Dr Majzoub in northern Syria in 2012 said he was a regular visitor to rebel-controlled zones. He reportedly acted as SNC representative to FSA units and facilitated talks between rebel groups.

But by the end of 2014, Assad remained firmly entrenched, the SNC was a fractured, irrelevant spectator to the struggle and Dr Majzoub had disappeared from news coverage of the war.

Disturbing Allegations

The Turkish police report that has lifted Dr Majzoub out of obscurity – and challenged his reputation as a moderate – is said to have been written by officers of the Turkish National Police Intelligence Department.

Dated September 26, 2012, it includes barcoded attachments apparently produced by the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation MIT and dated August 6, 2012.

Dr Majzoub told this writer in February that he “utterly” denied any involvement with weapons trafficking “in Syria or anywhere else”. He called the report’s contents “lies and fabrication.”

Australian sanctions law has prohibited the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer of weapons to Syria since 2011.

Dr Ahmet Yayla, director of the Center for Homeland Security at DeSales University in Pennsylvania and a faculty member of Georgetown University in Washington, DC, gave this writer a copy of the police report and backs its authenticity.

Dr Yayla served 20 years with the Turkish National Police Department of Counter-Terrorism and Operations and was counter-terrorism chief in Turkey’s Sanliurfa province, bordering Syria, between 2010 and 2013. He resigned from the police force in 2014 over the Erdogan administration’s facilitation of the so-called [“jihadi highway”](#) through Sanliurfa to Syria.

Dr Yayla cited the report in a May 2019 [study](#) of the IHH charity. He said he got it from a trusted former Turkish police officer. “It is definitely genuine,” he added.

Dr Yayla said the document provided to him was circulated for internal police information and discussion. It includes alleged wiretap transcripts and was based on the bugging and mapping of phone communications which “allowed the police to make a hierarchy of who is in touch with whom,” he said.

The report includes a relationship diagram connecting Dr Majzoub and four other men with Libyan citizen Abdaladim Ali Mossa Ben Ali.

Ben Ali is described as being involved in a plan by the Al-Qaeda in Iraq organisation – a predecessor of ISIS – to transport weapons from Libya to Syria via Turkey. Ben Ali was also “acting in connection with” the FSA, the document claimed.

The relationship diagram included the alleged roles and phone numbers of group members. Describing Dr Majzoub’s role as “weapons supply”, it listed his Turkish mobile phone number. Dr Majzoub used the same phone number to send WhatsApp messages to this writer.

The document claimed Dr Majzoub also had contact with Ali Musa Abdallah Al Jaburi “who was preparing to send weapons to the opposition in Syria”.

Dr Majzoub’s Denial

Dr Majzoub told this writer he never had any contact with Ben Ali, Al Jaburi or any other people named as part of the Ben Ali group. He said he believed he was named in the police report because he was a “well-known public figure” in the Syrian opposition and had “a wide range of contacts”.

However, weakening this argument, the report does not mention Dr Majzoub’s Australian identity or SNC connection. It

provides Dr Majzoub's name and phone number only.

Dr Majzoub said he believed the police report had only surfaced now because of the "current involvement of Turkish government in the Libyan conflict". Turkey has sent Syrian mercenaries and its own troops to fight in Libya's [civil war](#).

Dr Majzoub told this writer he was "hosted and welcomed" as an SNC representative in Libya by its National Transitional Council – a short-lived de facto government – in 2012. He did not reply to questions about his trip to Libya, but he said foreign fighters and ideologies had proven to be "a destroying machine to the Syrian revolution... against Assad dictatorship. This is my believe (sic), and what I was warning Syrian revolution about."

Dr Majzoub also did not reply to questions about the accuracy of a separate diagram in the police report showing eight men claimed to be his contacts. They included FSA deputy commander Malek Kurdi and senior officials of the [Muslim Brotherhood-linked charity IHH](#), which reportedly helped to [transfer Libyan weapons](#) to Syria in 2012.

Also named as Dr Majzoub's contacts were Ibrahim Kalin and Sefer Turan, senior advisors to then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been Turkey's president since late 2014. Kalin is now presidential spokesperson and Turan is Erdogan's chief advisor.

Abdullah Bozkurt, author of the Nordic Monitor expose describes Sefer Turan as a "very radical" supporter of

the [Muslim Brotherhood](#).

“He speaks Arabic very well and has been the key figure in coordinating the traffic between Erdogan and Arab groups across the Middle East. He’s a VIP guy,” Mr. Bozkurt told TIJ.

Dr Majzoub also argued that parts of the report made no sense. In an email he asked: “Would the MIT – a very loyal body to President Erdogan – work against the president, his advisers and spy on them to the extent of criminalising them? Would it shoot itself in the foot?”

In fact, Erdogan’s advisers are named as Dr Majzoub’s contacts in the police report, not in its MIT attachments. Dr Yayla explained that MIT would sometimes provide police with details of “weapons movements and other terrorist activities even if MIT considers them friendly. If MIT doesn’t share intelligence, it can become a liability for them.”

Dr Yayla also pointed out that Erdogan did not consolidate personal control over the national police force until late 2014, after purging the top officers of key departments including intelligence, counterterrorism and organised crime.

Dr Yayla said the police report’s claim that al-Qaeda figures were “operating in connection with” the Free Syrian Army was credible. “The FSA was big and not well organised and did not receive any training,” he said. “When al-Qaeda showed up in the region they had the discipline and knowledge and were very well organised. So, it was easy for them to infiltrate the FSA

and use them.”

Maybe Not So Moderate

In addition to his membership in the SNC, Dr Majzoub was the spokesperson for the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC) when it formed in 2014 with the goal of becoming the chief Sunni religious authority for the divided opposition to Assad. Four years later, around March 2018 the SIC issued a [fatwa](#) or religious decree justifying the killing of Kurdish fighters by Turkish-backed jihadists. They committed atrocities when they invaded Afrin in March 2018.

Dr Majzoub told this writer he no longer held the position of SIC spokesperson. He supplied a 2019 letter from a World Council of Churches official, Michel Nseir, praising his role in building “dialogue and cooperation” among Syrian Muslims and Christians “who share the values of democracy and human rights”.

Nevertheless, Dr Majzoub featured in several controversial incidents after casting his lot with the Syrian opposition in 2011.

He accused Australian authorities of compromising the security of his contacts inside and outside Syria when they [searched and questioned](#) him and his brother Sheikh Mustapha at Sydney airport on two occasions in 2012.

[Mustapha](#) became the first Australian known to have died in the

conflict, in northern Syria in August 2012, and Dr Majzoub presided over his funeral.

Sheikh Mustapha was killed in a rocket attack while doing “humanitarian and charity work”, according to his family and an Australian Islamic community spokesman.

However, [statements and Facebook posts](#) by rebel supporters and Sheikh Mustapha himself suggested he probably died in combat. He was already “on the radar of security services as an [extremist preacher](#)” and was “a [staunch recruiter](#) for the Syrian rebellion”.



Above: Sheikh Mustapha Al Majzoub the deceased brother of Fedaa Majzoub

Though born in Saudi Arabia, where his father Hassan studied Islam, Sheikh Mustapha spoke better English and seemed more familiar with mainstream Australian culture than his older brother. [Colleagues described](#) Mustapha as a “highly respected and much-loved” teacher at a Sydney Islamic school.

However, in a [speech](#) at his son’s memorial service in Sydney, Hassan Majzoub said Mustapha’s “love of jihad” was due to the time they spent together in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Some of Sheikh Mustapha’s Australian lectures shared on YouTube cast the Syrian conflict in purely sectarian terms, asserting that non-Muslims (a reference to Syria’s secular regime) must not be allowed to rule over Muslims.

And in an excited Facebook post from Syria, he reported: “Allah Akbar Allah Akbar 72 from the shabeeha (loyal alawaite [sic] supporters) have just been captured in the Kurd mountain in Latakia. It’s going off everywhere here Allah Akbar.” One of his Facebook followers asked, chillingly: “Have they been slaughtered yet?”

In December 2013, Syria’s Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi accused Dr Majzoub of involvement in the kidnapping of women and children during a rebel [massacre](#) of civilians in Latakia four months earlier.

[Human Rights Watch](#) found that rebels killed at least 190

civilians and seized over 200 – mostly women and children – as hostages in a “coordinated, planned attack on the civilian population” of undefended villages inhabited by members of the minority Alawite sect. The attack was launched from the town of Salma, near the Turkish border, where Mustapha Majzoub was killed the previous year.

Mr. Al-Zoubi claimed the Australian government was “well aware” of Dr Majzoub’s role in the incident but had “turned a blind eye and done nothing about it. This man is now present in Europe and working in Europe, and none of the European governments have done anything about it.” This may have been a reference to Dr Majzoub’s [reported presence](#) in Paris and London in preparation for the now-defunct, UN-backed “Geneva II” peace conference on Syria.

Al-Zoubi offered no evidence of Dr Majzoub’s involvement beyond a reference to his alleged use of “Australian telephone networks” during the Latakia offensive; Dr Majzoub denied any involvement. He was “the respected Aussie imam smeared by the Assad regime,” a [newspaper headline](#) declared.

However, 17 months after the massacre, Dr Majzoub appeared as a negotiator between the Syrian government and rebels who still held most of the kidnapped women and children. The pro-opposition news website [Zaman al-Wasl](#) said Dr Majzoub had been “accepted by rebels to bring the humanitarian tragedy to an end” by negotiating a prisoner swap.

Dr Majzoub also made a media appearance in relation to an attack on the Armenian-majority town of Kessab in northern Syria in March 2014. The rebel groups that assaulted the town

and [burned its churches](#) included an al-Qaeda affiliate.

According to the government-controlled Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah, which sympathised with Syrian rebels, Dr Majzoub organised the “evacuation” (Armenian sources called it kidnapping) of a group of elderly Kessab Armenians to Turkey, where they featured in Turkish government [propaganda](#).

The paper [quoted Dr Majzoub](#) as saying:

“We captured the town as a part of our war strategy...We helped the old people and sent them to Turkey.”

Dr Majzoub did not respond when the author of this investigation asked if he was accurately quoted.

Confirmation that Dr Majzoub is the individual named by Turkish police is a significant development in an unfolding tale of arms trafficking from Libya to Syria via Turkey. It broadens allegations of involvement beyond al-Qaeda related extremists to include the “moderate” wing of the Syrian insurgency – and alleges collusion between both camps.

Dr Majzoub confirmed to TIJ that he travelled to Libya but did not answer questions about his activities there. He denied any involvement with arms trafficking or the Ben Ali group.

Dr Majzoub was the only person named in the police report as playing a role in the Ben Ali group while also being in touch

with influential members of the Erdogan administration. It seems police were monitoring his phone calls with Erdogan's aides. If not weapons transfers, what did they discuss?

These developments revive earlier questions over Dr Majzoub and the SNC's relationship to rebel forces who, with cross-border support from Turkey, carried out atrocities against Alawite and Armenian civilians, among others.

With Turkish authorities implicated in all these events it is unlikely Dr Majzoub will be required to explain his role any time soon.

Appendix

A Turkish police intelligence report, intended for internal circulation, revealed links between the members of Libyan jihadist Ben Ali group and then-Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Leader Ben Ali worked closely with Fedaa Majzoub, who was in touch with Erdoğan's Chief advisors at the time İbrahim Kalın currently serving as presidential spokesperson and Sefer Turan now working as chief presidential advisor while arranging the movement of foreign fighters and the supply of weapons.

These classified intelligence documents reveal how the group of jihadist Ben Ali group led by Abdaladim Ali Mossa Ben Ali, a Libyan citizen with close ties to al-Qaeda actively transferred foreign fighters and weapons from Libya to Syria through Turkey. The police report included classified documents from the National Intelligence Organization (MIT)

that revealed intelligence on al-Qaeda in Libya connections to Turkey starting from July 2012.

(EK-2)

MIT Müsteşarlığı'nın Genelkurmay ve İDB'ye Muhatap 06 Ağustos 2012 Tarihli Yazısı

Irak'taki El Kaide örgütü tarafından, Libya'dan Suriye'ye Ülkemiz üzerinden gerçekleştirilen silah, mühimmat ve personel sevkiyatına lojistik destek sağlayan şebekeye yönelik araştırmalar neticesinde hazırlanan "iltisak şeması" ekte yer almaktadır.

Söz konusu şemada yer alan şahıslardan kimlik bilgileri tespit edilebilenler;

-Thirwat SHIHATA; (Salah-El Seyyide oğlu, Mısır/Şarkiya 29/06/1960 doğumlu)

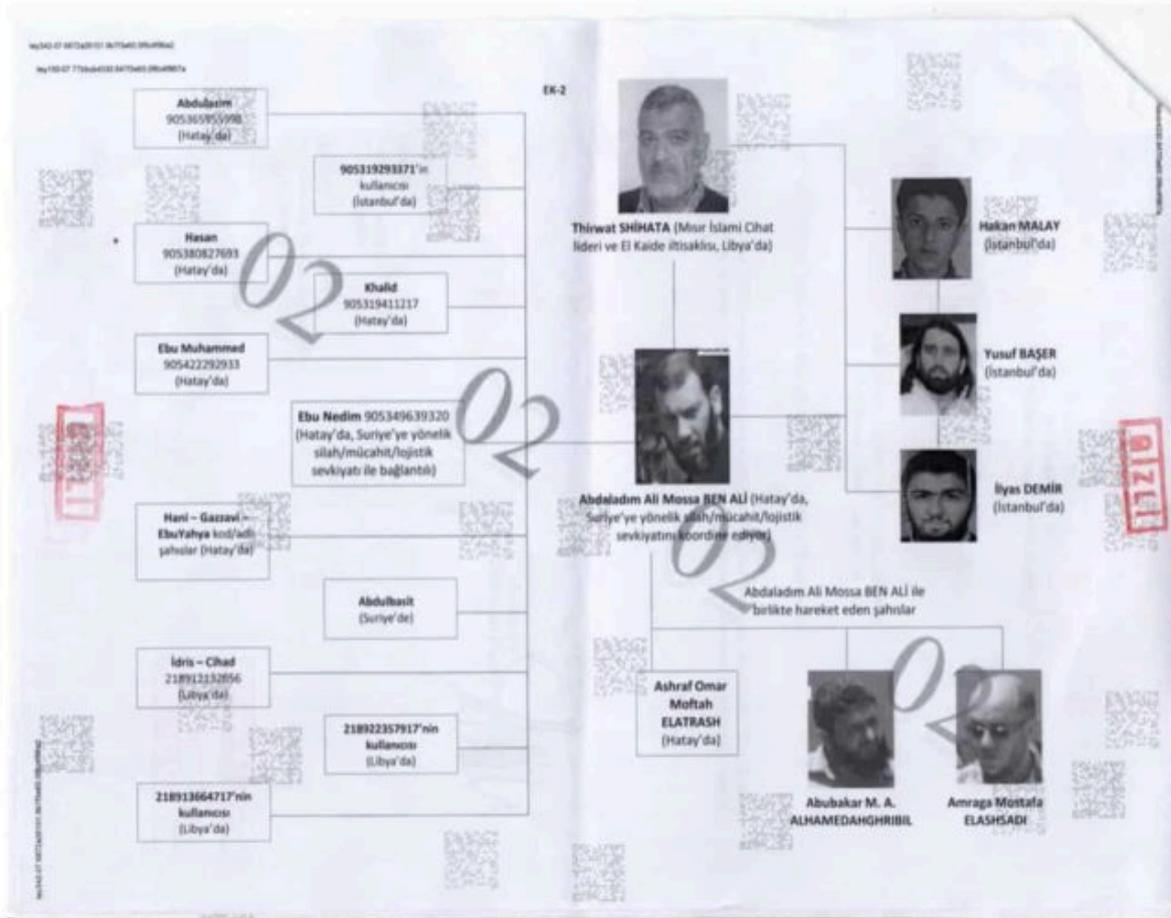
-Abdaladım Ali Mossa BEN ALİ; (1969 Derna doğumlu, 541753 seri nolu Libya pasaportu hamili)

-Hakan MALAY; (T.C.Kimlik No: 15877704852)

-Yusuf BAŞER ; (T.C.Kimlik No: 55501323622)

-İlyas DEMİR ; (T.C.Kimlik No: 70384018472)

şeklinde dir.



A secret document dated July 18, 2012 leaked from the Turkish intelligence agency MIT shows how al-Qaeda had been moving

arms and fighters to Syria through Turkey.

Will Geneva talks lead right back to Assad's 2011 reforms?

By Sharmine Narwani

Source: [RT](#)

Syrian peace talks have already stalled. The opposition refused to be in the same room as the government delegation, while the latter blamed opposition 'preconditions' and the organizers' inability to produce a 'list of designated terrorists'.

The UN's special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura has now promised talks will reconvene on February 25, but how will he achieve this?

So much has shifted on the global political stage and in the Syrian military theater since this negotiation process first began gaining steam.

In just the past few weeks, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies have recaptured key areas in Latakia, Idlib, Daraa, Homs and Aleppo, and are making their way up to the Turkish border, cutting off supply lines and exits for opposition militants along the way.

While analysts and politicians on both sides of the fence have warned that a 'military solution' to the Syrian crisis is not feasible, the SAA's gains are starting to look very much like one. And with each subsequent victory, the ability for the opposition to raise demands looks to be diminished.

Already, western sponsors of the talks have as much as

conceded that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will continue to play a role in any future government – a slap in the face to the foreign-backed Syrian opposition that have demanded his exit.

And the long list of deliverables in peace talks yet to come – transitional governance, ceasefires, constitutional reform, and elections – are broad concepts, vague enough to be shaped to advantage by the dominant military power on the ground.

The shaping of post-conflict political landscapes invariably falls to the victor – not the vanquished. And right now, Geneva looks to be the place where this may happen, under the watch of many of the states that once threw their weight – weapons, money, training, support – behind the Syrian ‘opposition.’

So here’s a question: As the military landscape inside Syria continues to move in the government’s favor, will a final deal look very much different than the 2011 reforms package offered by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad?

Assad’s 2011 reforms

In early 2011, the Syrian government launched a series of potentially far-reaching reforms, some of these unprecedented since the ascendance of the Baath party to power in 1963.

Arriving in Damascus in early January 2012 – my third trip to Syria, and my first since the crisis began – I was surprised to find restrictions on Twitter and Facebook already lifted, and a space for more open political discourse underway.

That January, less than ten months into the crisis, around 5,000 Syrians were dead, checkpoints and security crackdowns abounded, while themes such as “the dictator is killing his own people” and “the protests are peaceful” still dominated western headlines.

Four years later, with the benefit of hindsight, many of these

things can be contextualized. The 'protests' were not all 'peaceful' – and casualties were racking up equally on both sides. We see this armed opposition more clearly now that they are named Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS. But back in early 2012, these faces were obfuscated – they were all called “peaceful protestors forced to take up arms against a repressive government.”

Nevertheless, in early 2011, the Syrian government began launching its reforms – some say only to placate restive populations; others saw it as an opportunity for Assad to shrug off the anti-reform elements in his government and finish what he intended to start in 2000's 'Damascus Spring.'

Either way, the reforms came hard and fast – some big, some small: decrees suspending almost five decades of emergency law that prohibited public gatherings, the establishment of a multi-party political system and term limits for the presidency, the removal of Article 8 of the constitution that assigned the Baath party as “the leader of state and society,” citizenship approval for tens of thousands of Kurds, the suspension of state security courts, the removal of laws prohibiting the niqab, the release of prisoners, the granting of general amnesty for criminals, the granting of financial autonomy to local authorities, the removal of controversial governors and cabinet members, new media laws that prohibited the arrest of journalists and provided for more freedom of expression, dissolution of the cabinet, reducing the price of diesel, increasing pension funds, allocating housing, investment in infrastructure, opening up direct citizen access to provincial leaders and cabinet members, the establishment of a presidential committee for dialogue with the opposition – and so forth.

But almost immediately, push back came from many quarters, usually accompanied by the 'Arab Spring' refrain: “it's too late.”

But was it?

Western governments complained about reforms not being implemented. But where was the time – and according to whose time-frame? When the Assad government forged ahead with constitutional reforms and called for a nationally-held referendum to gain citizen buy-in, oppositionists sought a boycott and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the referendum “phony” and “a cynical ploy.”

Instead, just two days earlier, at a meeting in Tunis, Clinton threw her significant weight behind the unelected, unrepresentative, Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Syrian National Council (SNC): “We do view the Syrian National Council as a leading legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change.”

And when, in May 2012, Syria held parliamentary elections – the first since the constitution revamp – the US State Department called the polls: “bordering on ludicrous.”

But most insidious of all the catch-phrases and slogans employed to undermine the Syrian state, was the insistence that reforms were “too late” and “Assad must go.” When, in the evolution of a political system, is it too late to try to reform it? When, in the evolution of a political system, do external voices, from foreign capitals, get to weigh in on a head of state more loudly than its own citizens?

According to statements made by two former US policymakers to McClatchy News: “The goal had been to ‘ratchet up’ the Syria response incrementally, starting with U.S. condemnation of the violence and eventually suggesting that Assad had lost legitimacy.”

“The White House and the State Department both – and I include myself in this – were guilty of high-faluting rhetoric without any kind of hard policy tools to make the rhetoric stick,” confessed Robert Ford, former US Ambassador to Syria.

An analysis penned by veteran Middle East correspondent Michael Jansen at the onset of the talks in Geneva last week ponders the point: “The Syrian crisis might have been resolved in 2011 if US president Barack Obama had not declared on August 18th that year that his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad had to ‘step aside.’”

Were the additional 250,000 Syrian deaths worth those empty slogans? Or might reforms, in Syrian hands, have been worth a try?

Domestic dissent, Assad and reforms

The story inside Syria, within the dissident community, still varied greatly during my January 2012 trip. But with the exception of one, Fayez Sara, who went on to eventually leave the country and join the SNC, Syrian dissidents with whom I met unanimously opposed sanctions, foreign intervention and the militarization of the conflict.

Did they embrace the reforms offered up in 2011? Mostly not – the majority thought reforms would be “cosmetic” and meaningless without further fundamental changes, much of this halted by the growing political violence. When Assad invited them to participate in his constitutional reform deliberations, did these dissidents step up? No – many refused to engage directly with the government, probably calculating that “Assad would go” and reluctant to shoulder the stigma of association.

But were these reforms not a valuable starting point, at least? Political systems don’t evolve overnight – they require give-and-take and years of uphill struggle.

Aref Dalila, one of the leaders of the ‘Damascus Spring’ who spent eight years in prison, told me: “The regime consulted with me and others between March and May and asked our opinion. I told them there has to be very serious reforms immediately and not just for show, but they preferred to go by

other solutions.”

Bassam al-Kadi, who was imprisoned for seven years in the 1990s, managed to find one upside to reforms:

Speaking about the abolishment of the state security courts in early 2011, Kadi said: “Since 1973 until last May, it was actually a court outside of any laws and it was the strong arm of the regime. All trials held after abolishing this court have taken place in civilian courts. Sometimes the intelligence apparatus intervenes but in most cases the judge behaves according to his or her opinion. Hundreds of my friends who were arrested in the past few months, most were released within one or two weeks.”

This reform, by the way, took place a mere few months before Jordan’s constitutional reforms added another security layer – the state military courts – for which it was promptly lauded.

Hassan Abdel Azim, head of the National Coordination Committee (NCC) which included 15 opposition parties, took a different view: “Our point of view is that such reforms can only take place when violence stops against protestors...But since the regime tries to enforce its reforms, the result will only be partial reforms that enhances its image but not lead to real change.”

The NCC went on to have a short-lived alliance with the foreign-based SNC which fell apart over disagreements on “non-Arab foreign intervention.”

Louay Hussein who headed the Tayyar movement and spent seven years in prison when he was 22 (and recently as well), told me that January: “We consider Assad responsible for everything that’s happened but we are not prepared to put the country in trouble...In March, we wanted what the regime is giving now (reforms). But when the system started using live bullets we wanted to change it and change it quickly. But after all this time we have to reconsider our strategy.”

And the list goes on. The views ranged from dissidents who “like Assad, but hate the system” to those who wanted a wholesale change that was arrived at through a consultative process – but definitely not foreign intervention. Eighteen months later when I revisited some of these people, their views had transformed quite dramatically in light of the escalation of political violence. Even the ones who blamed the government for this escalation seemed to put their arms around the state, as nationalists first and foremost.

Had the conflict not taken on this stark foreign-backed dimension and become so heavily militarized, they may have expended their energies on pushing at the limits of reforms already on the table.

How can Geneva transform Syria?

First on the table in Geneva is the establishment of a transitional process that gets the two sides working on common governance. On a parallel track, demilitarization is on the menu – which basically consists of organizing ceasefires throughout Syria. The transitional team will then work on hammering out a new constitution, with elections to be held within 18 months.

That sounds a bit like the process already underway in Syria in 2011 and 2012.

Certainly, the opposition believes it has a stronger hand today than back in 2011, supported as it is by the UN-sponsored Geneva process. But the difficulties will start the moment decisions need to be made about which opposition participates in the transitional body, if they can even manage to convince the Syrian government – now racking up military victories every week – that it needs to relinquish a chunk of its authority to this new entity.

It is the kind of ‘opposition’ that eventually enters the transitional process that will help ultimately determine its

outcome. Look for some Riyadh- and Turkish-backed opponents to be tossed by the wayside during this process.

With the introduction of Russian air power and qualitative military hardware last autumn, the Syrian army and its allies have gained critical momentum in the field.

So why would the Syrian state backtrack on that momentum to give up authority in Geneva? Even the expectation of this is illogical.

There is a growing consensus among Syria analysts that the Americans have ceded the Syrian theater to the Russians and Moscow's allies. Washington has barely registered any meaningful objections to Russian airstrikes over the past months, apart from some sound bites about hitting 'moderate rebels' and not focusing enough on ISIS.

Part of the US problem is that, without any clear cut Syria strategy, it has found itself neck-deep in this crisis without any means to extricate itself from the uncomfortable dependencies of thousands of rebel militants, and the demands of increasingly belligerent allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

They Russians offer that opportunity – like they did in 2013 by taking the Syrian chemical weapons program off the table – and it looks like Washington is grabbing it with both hands right now. It is likely that Moscow waited to intervene in the Syrian quagmire only when it was absolutely sure the US needed an exit – any earlier, and the Americans were still playing both sides and all cards.

For Geneva to move forward, the participants are going to have to make some awkward commitments. Firstly, the batch of Islamists-for-hire that currently makes up the opposition will need to be finessed – or torn apart – to include a broad swathe of Syrian ethnic groups, sects, political viewpoints and... women.

Secondly, all parties to the talks need to agree on which militants in the Syrian theater are going to make that "terrorist list." This was a clear deliverable outlined in Vienna, and it hasn't been done. This all-important list will make clear which militants are to be part of a future ceasefire, and which ones will be 'fair game.'

After all, there can be NO ceasefires until we know who is a designated terrorist and who can be a party to ground negotiations.

I suspect, however, that this terrorist list has been neglected for good reason. It has spared western rebel-sponsors the discomfort of having to face the wrath of their militants, while allowing time for the Russians and Syrians to mow these groups into the ground. Hence the stream of recent victories – and the accompanying timid reaction from Washington.

As the balance of power shifts further on the ground, we may see a much-altered 'Geneva.' Will it genuinely beget a political process, will the players at the table change, will the 'political solution' be entirely manufactured behind the curtains... only to be offered up to an unsuspecting public as a victory wrenched from a 'bad regime?'

Because, right now, Syria would be fortunate to have those 2011 reforms on that table, the rapt attention of the global community encouraging them forward, weapons at rest. A quarter million Syrians could have been spared, hundreds of towns, cities and villages still intact, millions of displaced families in their own homes.

Perhaps Geneva can bring those reforms back, wrapped in a prettier package this time, so we can clap our hands and declare ourselves satisfied.

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