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Thanks, Steven. I think that what Renaud Girard eloquently said is worth some thinking over.

What are the implications of what he told us?

First, secularism. I'm afraid we're being completely manipulated on the meaning of that term. In the name of the Syrian regime's self-proclaimed secularism we've got war crimes, we've got the use of chemical weapons and we've got the destruction of a country by a dictatorship refusing to share power. So it's essential to start out by saying which secularism we want. I, a secular democrat, do not want the term secularism to be associated with those horrors and to acquire such a reputation because the worst and most violent confessional policies are being carried out in its name.

Likewise, the manipulation of anti-Islamic attitudes leads us to conclusions that are very risky, in my opinion. You don't offer any solutions in what you say, you just criticise. With regard to France in particular, France has taken the worthiest, most honourable and most consistent positions. The problem isn't that France is wrong. The problem is that France has no reliable allies on this policy and that, standing alone on the Syrian issue, it was very hard to have a policy that could really make a difference.

The problem is that the West's policy was inconsistent. That is a fact. Certain things had to be done at a certain time. They weren't. The situation got more complicated. The more complicated it got, the riskier the actions became. And the longer we wait, the fewer decent options we'll have.

The most urgent issue today is obviously to deal with the jihadist problem in Syria. That is everybody's priority, including the Syrian democrats. But dealing with the jihadist problem requires an approach that bypasses Bashar al-Assad, who is behind the incitement of that current. He is systematically waging war, personally and individually targeting democratic opponents. They are the ones he sends his henchmen to kill in their homes, for they represent the most serious threat to him precisely because they are secular and moderate. We must therefore put an end to two extremisms feeding off each other. The situation is simple if we look at it this way. There is one thing nobody can deny. There were no jihadists in Syria when the revolution started. It was democratic. When the uprising turned into a war, funding came in from outside. Most of that outside funding came from conservative Muslim countries, where Islamic fundamentalism is dominant. Private networks played an even bigger role than governments when it came to supplying the most fundamentalist Islamic networks, which may suit other places but not Syria. That much is clear. So the situation has moved in a direction rejected by 90%, 95%, 99% of the Syrian population. But the jihadists' best ally is the violence that was introduced by al-Assad. The jihadists' best ally today is the chaos created by the regime.

That is why personally — and I am not the only one — among the Syrian opposition's democrats, we're in favour of the Geneva conference, we're in favour of political negotiations. Moreover, we've always wanted them, but they weren't possible. Today there's a consensus. It's necessary to go to Geneva for several reasons. First, the democrats will find an area of action there that they don't have today because they've lost it. Second, because I think that the biggest threat for el-Assad is to come face-to-face with democratic opponents. That's very dangerous for him. It would be impossible for him to come to the negotiating table himself. The United Nations Human Rights Council now characterises him as a war criminal. Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has just said that investigators, who have been working for two years, have established evidence of his personal responsibility, that he personally ordered crimes. It would therefore be inconceivable for the opposition to sit down with el-Assad but it goes without saying that a delegation appointed by him will come from the regime's side.

Steven Erlanger, London Bureau Chief, *The New York Times*

In the same way that it was inconceivable for the France of de Gaulle to negotiate with the FLN after a schoolteacher couple was assassinated.



Bassma Kodmani, Executive Director, Arab Reform Initiative

I don't think we disagree. Nobody can imagine el-Assad at the table. People he appoints will come to Geneva. So the problem isn't posed in those terms.

The question is the content of Geneva 2. I think that to make Geneva 2 happen, first we need the active and sincere cooperation of the region's countries. We need the foreign fighters to leave Syria, all the foreign fighters. As far as the regime is concerned, you may know, but perhaps not enough, how much it relies today on Hezbollah's militias but even more on militias with a purely confessional, purely Shiite character, which say they have come to defend Shiite holy places in Syria, even though those places have never been under threat, and that are fighting for el-Assad today. The departure of those forces must occur when the talks start. On the other side, the jihadists and all those who have come from outside, every foreign fighter, must leave Syria.

I would like to wrap up with four points on the Geneva conference. Geneva 2 must be based on the document of Geneva 1. That's the most suitable, most acceptable thing we've got. It hasn't been accepted by the regime yet, but the opposition says it's an acceptable basis for talks. The weapons must stop. The foreign weapons, which are supplied to Syria from outside, must stop. Iran has an essential, fundamental role to play in order to be welcomed to the negotiating table, by recognising Geneva 1, demanding the departure of foreign fighters and interrupting the flow of arms. The same goes for the other side. I absolutely insist on emphasizing the fact that this is an absolutely symmetrical demand. The opposition must have a steady dialogue with the armed groups on the ground from now on. The solution to be presented to them, the choice to be presented to them, should be the following: either you agree to submit to the outcome of the diplomatic, political process, which will lead to a negotiated solution and a compromise; or you will be considered terrorist forces and fought with weapons. That's what is on the table today. A political player is needed, the transitional government, which cannot be el-Assad himself but that, I repeat, can be a transitional government. That transitional government's first task will be fighting the jihadists. But first a line must be drawn to know who are the jihadists to fight, which rebels agree to join the process and which will be excluded from it and become a security risk. Lastly, I'd like to say that the 2014 presidential election will be off as soon as the negotiation process gets under way and a transitional government is formed: it no longer exists. The argument that the 2014 election will decide no longer holds water because the transitional government must develop a new timetable for the transition period. Nobody will be ready for an election in 2014: not the regime, much less the opposition.

Thank you.