



# A Reformer, You Say?

## *Three Years Ago, Clinton Called Syria's Assad "A Reformer" – One Of Many Missteps Still Haunting The Obama-Clinton Foreign Policy*

**Three Years Ago Today, Then-Secretary Of State Hillary Clinton Said Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad Was "A Reformer."** CLINTON: "There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer."

(CBS' [Face The Nation](#), 3/27/11)

- **Clinton Said Assad Was A "Different Leader" From His Autocratic Father And Was A "Reformer."** CBS' BOB SCHIEFFER: "But I mean, how can that be worse than what has happened in Syria over the years, where Bashar Assad's father killed 25,000 people at (inaudible). I mean, they opened fire with live ammunition on these civilians. Why is that different from Libya? This is the friend of Iran, an enemy of Israel?" CLINTON: "Well, if there were a coalition of the international community, if there were the passage of a security council resolution, if there were a call by the Arab League, if there was a condemnation that was universal. But that is not going to happen because I don't think that it's yet clear what will occur, what will unfold. There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer. What's been happening there the last few weeks is deeply concerning. But there's a difference between calling out aircraft and indiscriminately strafing and bombing your own cities than police actions which frankly have exceeded the use of force that any of us would want to see." (CBS' [Face The Nation](#), 3/27/11)

### *The Obama Administration Suffered From "Wishful Thinking" On The Situation In Syria*

**In Her Comments, Clinton Was Reflecting A Piece Of "Wishful Thinking" To Which The Obama Administration Had "Tenaciously Clung."** "Ms. Clinton was only reflecting a piece of wishful thinking to which the Obama administration and its congressional allies have tenaciously clung: that Mr. Assad, despite his brutality, sponsorship of terrorism and close alliance with Iran, can somehow be turned into a Western ally." (Editorial, "Can Syria's Dictator Reform?" [The Washington Post](#), 3/29/11)

- **The Obama Administration Believed That Assad, "Despite His Brutality, Sponsorship Of Terrorism, And Close Alliance With Iran," Could Somehow Become A Western Ally.** "Ms. Clinton was only reflecting a piece of wishful thinking to which the Obama administration and its congressional allies have tenaciously clung: that Mr. Assad, despite his brutality, sponsorship of terrorism and close alliance with Iran, can somehow be turned into a Western ally." (Editorial, "Can Syria's Dictator Reform?" [The Washington Post](#), 3/29/11)

## AND CLINTON WASN'T THE ONLY ONE: THE ADMINISTRATION'S MESSAGE ON SYRIA HAS BEEN MUDDLED FROM THE BEGINNING

### *Obama Tried To Rewrite His Own Red Line On Syria*

**In August 2012, Obama Said That The Use Or Movement Of Chemical Weapons In Syria Would Be A "Red Line" That Would "Change My Calculus."** OBAMA: "We cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people. We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus." (President Barack Obama, [Remarks To The White House Press Corps](#), Washington, DC, 8/20/12)

- **"The Moment Offers A Vivid Hindsight View Of A President's Words And Actions Colliding With National Security Implications, As The Syrian Conflict Approaches A Grim Third Anniversary."** (Scott Wilson, "On Syria, Obama's Past Words Collide With National Security Implications," [The Washington Post](#), 2/20/14)

**Obama, 2013: "First Of All, I Didn't Set A Red Line. The World Set A Red Line. ... That Wasn't Something I Just Kind Of Made Up. I Didn't Pluck It Out Of Thin Air."** OBAMA: "Let me unpack the question. First of all, I didn't set a red line. The world set a red line. The world set a red line when governments representing 98 percent of the world's population said the use of chemical weapons are abhorrent and passed a treaty forbidding their use, even when countries are engaged in war. Congress set a red line when it ratified that treaty. Congress set a red line when it indicated that in a piece of legislation entitled the 'Syria Accountability Act' that some of the horrendous things happening on the ground there need to be answered for. So, when I said in a press conference that my calculus about what's happening in Syria would be altered by the use of chemical weapons, which the overwhelming consensus of humanity says is wrong, that wasn't something I just kind of made up. I didn't pluck it out of thin air. There's a reason for it." (President Barack Obama, [Press Conference](#), 9/4/13)

### *John Kerry Praised Assad As Being "Very Generous"*

**Then-Senator John Kerry, March 2011: "President Assad Has Been Very Generous With Me In Terms Of The Discussions We Have Had."** QUESTION: "Thank you. I'm Dave Pollock from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Thank you, Senator. I wanted to ask you what you think could be done to encourage democracy in Syria and Iran?" KERRY: "Well, I personally believe that -- I mean, this is my belief, okay? But President Assad has been very generous with me in terms of the discussions we have had. And when I last went to -- the last several trips to Syria -- I asked President Assad to do certain things to build the relationship with the United States and sort of show the good faith that would help us to move the process forward." (Sen. John Kerry, Remarks To The Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, Washington, D.C., 3/16/11)

- **Kerry: "My Judgment Is That Syria Will Move; Syria Will Change, As It Embraces A Legitimate Relationship With The United States..."** KERRY: "So my judgment is that Syria will move; Syria will change, as it embraces a legitimate relationship with the United States and the West and economic opportunity that comes with it and the participation that comes with it." (Sen. John Kerry, Remarks To The Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, Washington, D.C., 3/16/11)

**The Washington Post: Assad's Pledges Of Reform Once Won Him "Prominent Admirers" In The U.S., Such As John Kerry.** "Assad's Western habits and seemingly moderate views had initially inspired optimism among Western acquaintances and Syria watchers about his leadership of the strategically vital country of 20 million. Assad's pledges to implement political and economic reform once won him

prominent admirers in the United States, including Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.” (Joby Warrick and Anne Gearan, “For Besieged Syrian Dictator Assad, Only Exit May Be Body Bag,” [The Washington Post](#), 7/31/12)

**In 2009, John Kerry Even Dined Privately With Assad And His Wife.** “Last month, Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry called on the world to help the [Syrian] opposition both in ending [Bashar al-]Assad’s reign of terror and in preparing for what comes next after he is gone. But as recently as 2009, he appears to have been privately dining with the Syrian strongman and his wife.” (John Stanton, “When Senator John Kerry Dined With Assad,” [BuzzFeed](#), 9/6/12)

## **FAST FORWARD TO TODAY: THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION’S SYRIA POLICY HAS FAILED**

***The Washington Post’s Fred Hiatt: “It Is No Secret That The Obama Administration’s Syria Policy, To The Extent That One Exists, Is Failing.”*** (Fred Hiatt, Op-Ed, “Senators Say John Kerry Admitted U.S. Failure In Syria,” [The Washington Post](#), 2/3/14)

- ***The Washington Post Editorial Headline: “The U.S. Must Reconsider Its Failed Syrian Policy”*** (Editorial, “The U.S. Must Reconsider Its Failed Syrian Policy,” [The Washington Post](#), 2/3/14)

**The Obama Administration Acknowledged That Diplomacy, “The Main Pillar” Of Its Syria Policy, Is Failing.** “The Obama administration acknowledged Tuesday that diplomacy, the main pillar of its Syria policy, is failing even as civil war is destroying the country, leaving open the question of what the United States will or can do to stop the slaughter.” (Anne Gearan, “Diplomacy Is Failing In Syria, Obama Acknowledges,” [The Washington Post](#), 2/11/14)

### ***As The Administration’s Strategy Continues To Fail, The Crisis In Syria Has Escalated***

**Hiatt: “President Obama Pronounced 2½ Years Ago That ‘The Time Has Come For President Assad To Step Aside.’ Since Then, As The Humanitarian Disaster Has Escalated, The U.S. President Has Been Inert.”** (Fred Hiatt, Op-Ed, “Senators Say John Kerry Admitted U.S. Failure In Syria,” [The Washington Post](#), 2/3/14)

- **Over 140,000 Have Been Killed In Syria And Millions Have Been Displaced.** “The conflict in Syria, which has now entered a fourth year, has killed more than 140,000 people and displaced millions since it began in March 2011.” (“UN Envoy Rules Out New Syria Talks ‘For Time Being,’” [Agence France-Presse](#), 3/24/14)

**James Clapper, Director Of National Intelligence, Called The Syrian Crisis An “Apocalyptic Disaster.”** “Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr., in testimony before Congress on Tuesday, called the war, which has killed more than 110,000 and displaced millions, an ‘apocalyptic disaster.’” (Anne Gearan, “Diplomacy Is Failing In Syria, Obama Acknowledges,” [The Washington Post](#), 2/11/14)

- **Clapper: Assad’s Position Has Grown Stronger Over The Past Year.** “One reason is that Mr. Assad’s position has grown stronger over the past year, as the United States’ top intelligence official, James R. Clapper Jr., told Congress recently. The opposition, in contrast, is somewhat fragmented.” (Michael R. Gordon, “Kerry Blames Syrian Government For Deadlocked Talks,” [The New York Times](#), 2/16/14)

## **AND THE ADMINISTRATION’S HIGHLY TOUTED GENEVA II PEACE TALKS SO FAR HAVE FAILED**

**After Months Of Delays, A Geneva II Conference Meant To Negotiate An End To The Syrian Civil War Began In January.** “After months of delays, a ‘Geneva II’ conference meant to broker an end to the Syrian civil war has been scheduled to begin on January 22 in Geneva, Switzerland, the United Nations

said Monday morning. ... The conference would bring representatives from Syria's government and elements of the opposition to negotiate an end to the fighting that has wracked Syria since March 2011." ("Syria Peace Conference Set For January 22, U.N. Says," [CNN](#), 11/25/13)

- **The Geneva II Syrian Peace Talks Represented The Best Hope Of Solving The Conflict At A Negotiating Table.** "Peace talks in Geneva were 18 difficult months in the making and represent the best hope of the United States and the United Nations that the nearly three-year-old conflict can end at a negotiating table. In the absence of any appetite for deposing President Bashar al-Assad by force, diplomacy is the only strategy Obama has advanced to end the fighting." (Anne Gearan, "Diplomacy Is Failing In Syria, Obama Acknowledges," [The Washington Post](#), 2/11/14)

### ***The U.N. Mediator Says Resuming The Peace Talks Is "Out Of The Question" For Now***

**Just This Week, U.N. Mediator Lakhdar Brahimi Said The Resumption Of Syrian Peace Talks In Geneva Was "Out Of The Question" For Now.** "The international mediator on Syria said on Monday a resumption of peace talks in Geneva between Damascus and the opposition was 'out of the question' for the moment." ("UN Envoy Rules Out New Syria Talks 'For Time Being,'" [Agence France-Presse](#), 3/24/14)

- **Brahimi: "A Return To Geneva Is Out Of Question For The Time Being Because The Criteria Have Not Been Met."** "'A return to Geneva is out of question for the time being because the criteria have not been met,' UN and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said in Kuwait." ("UN Envoy Rules Out New Syria Talks 'For Time Being,'" [Agence France-Presse](#), 3/24/14)

**U.N. Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi Has Questioned The Value Of Continuing The Peace Talks.** "Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations special envoy to the negotiations, underscored the frustration when he apologized to the Syrian people over the weekend and questioned the value of continuing the talks." (Michael R. Gordon, "Kerry Blames Syrian Government For Deadlocked Talks," [The New York Times](#), 2/16/14)

### ***And As The Latest Rounds Of Talks Collapsed With No Resumption Date Planned, The Violence In Syria Will Most Likely Intensify***

**"A Second Round Of Peace Negotiations Collapsed In Geneva On February 15."** ("UN Envoy Rules Out New Syria Talks 'For Time Being,'" [Agence France-Presse](#), 3/24/14)

**"With No Date Set For A Resumption Of Talks, It Seems Likely The Violence Will Only Continue To Intensify."** (Anne Gearan and Loveday Morris, "Syria Talks End On A Note Of Uncertainty, U.S. Frustration With Russia," [The Washington Post](#), 2/15/14)

- **"Western Diplomats Have Acknowledged That They Have No Plan B For What To Do Next Should Negotiations Fail."** (Anne Gearan and Loveday Morris, "Syria Talks End On A Note Of Uncertainty, U.S. Frustration With Russia," [The Washington Post](#), 2/15/14)

**The Geneva Convention Is The Only Strategy Obama Has Advanced To Try To End The War.** "The Geneva talks represent the only strategy Obama has advanced to try to end the war, and both Obama and Secretary of State John F. Kerry have acknowledged in recent days that it isn't working." (Anne Gearan and Loveday Morris, "Syria Talks End On A Note Of Uncertainty, U.S. Frustration With Russia," [The Washington Post](#), 2/15/14)

- **But Both He And John Kerry Have Admitted The Talks Aren't Working.** "The Geneva talks represent the only strategy Obama has advanced to try to end the war, and both Obama and Secretary of State John F. Kerry have acknowledged in recent days that it isn't working." (Anne Gearan and Loveday Morris, "Syria Talks End On A Note Of Uncertainty, U.S. Frustration With Russia," [The Washington Post](#), 2/15/14)

**The Washington Post Editorial: "Now That The 'Geneva 2' Conference On Syria Has Collapsed, Secretary Of State John F. Kerry Is Trying To Distance Himself From The Wreckage Of An Initiative"**

**That He Made The Focus Of The Obama Administration's Syria Policy For Nine Critical Months."**

(Editorial, "Mr. Kerry's Futile Syria Initiative," [The Washington Post](#), 2/22/14)