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## Phyllis Bennis

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Crossing the Middle East's red lines.

# Moral Obscenities in Syria

*Phyllis Bennis and David Wildman on August 27, 2013 - 12:49 PM ET*

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*A man inspects a site hit by what activists said were missiles fired by Syrian Air Force fighter jets loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, in Raqqa province, eastern Syria August 21, 2013. (Reuters/Nour Fourat)*

The threat of a reckless, dangerous, and illegal US or US-led assault on Syria is looking closer than ever.

The US government has been divided over the Syria crisis since it began. Some, especially in the Pentagon and some of the intelligence agencies, said direct military intervention would be dangerous and would accomplish nothing. Others, especially in Congress and some in the State Department, have demanded military attacks, even regime change, against the Syrian leadership, even before anyone made allegations of chemical weapons. The Obama administration has been divided too, with President Obama seemingly opposed to any US escalation. The American people are not divided—60 percent are against intervening in Syria's civil war even if chemical weapons were involved.

But the situation is changing rapidly, and the Obama administration appears to be moving closer to direct military intervention. That would make the dire situation in Syria inestimably worse.

The attack that killed so many civilians, including many children, last Wednesday may well have been from a chemical weapon. Doctors Without Borders, in touch with local hospitals they support, said that while the symptoms "strongly indicate" that thousands of patients were exposed to a neurotoxic agent, they "can neither scientifically confirm the cause of these symptoms nor establish who is responsible for the attack." The United Nations chemical weapons inspection team already in Syria to investigate earlier claims was granted permission by the government to visit the new site today; they have not yet reported any findings.

No one knows yet what actually happened, other than a horrific attack on civilians, many of whom died. No one has yet made public any evidence of what killed them, or who may be responsible. All attacks on civilians are war crimes—regardless of whether they are carried out by the Syrian army, rebel militias or US cruise missiles.

And yet the calls, the demands, the assumptions of a looming US attack on Syria are rising.

NBC News reported that the US had “very little doubt” that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons. *The Wall Street Journal* quoted an anonymous “senior defense official” who said the military strikes being considered “would be conducted from ships in the Eastern Mediterranean using long-range missiles, without using manned aircraft. ‘You do not need basing. You do not need over-flight. You don’t need to worry about defenses.’”

Despite Secretary of State John Kerry’s claim that a chemical attack was “undeniable,” we still don’t know for sure that it was a chemical weapon, and we certainly don’t know who did it. Kerry spoke this afternoon, calling the attack a “moral obscenity.” If it was a chemical attack, as appears likely, it certainly is just that. So far in this war, over 100,000 people have been killed and millions forced from their homes—aren’t all of those moral obscenities?

### Even If

Kerry seems to believe that this moral obscenity requires military action in response. Graham and McCain said so earlier. But he’s wrong. It’s likely that it was a chemical agent of some sort that led to mass sickness and many deaths in the Damascus suburb. And maybe it was the Syrian regime that was responsible for it. The questions that would then need to be asked, the questions “even if,” have to start with “So what should we do?”

Does anyone really believe that a military strike on an alleged chemical weapons factory would help the Syrian people, would save any lives, would help bring an end to this horrific civil war? What’s the best we could hope for, that a cruise missile strike would actually succeed, would accurately find its target and explode a warehouse full of chemical agents into airborne clouds of death?

### Illegal Even If

The US government is creating a false dichotomy—it’s either a military strike, or we let them get away with it. No one is talking about any other kind of international accountability, nothing like the International Criminal Court. Last month, the White House “law group” noted that arming the rebels might violate international law. Do they think a cruise missile strike is okay? We heard President Obama a couple of days ago refer to international law. He said “if the US goes in and attacks another country without a UN mandate and without clear evidence that can be presented, then there are questions in terms of whether international law supports it ... and those are considerations that we have to take into account.”

But what we’re hearing now is that the model under consideration for a US military strike on Syria would be that of Kosovo. Remember that one, back in 1999, at the end of the Bosnia war? That time, knowing it was impossible to get Security Council agreement for an air war against Serbia over the disputed enclave of Kosovo, the US and its allies simply announced that they would get their international permission slip somewhere else. That would be the NATO high command. What a surprise, the NATO generals agreed with their respective presidents and prime ministers, and said, sure, we think it’s a great idea. The problem is, the UN Charter is very clear on what constitutes a legal use of military force—and permission from NATO isn’t on that very short list. If the Security Council does not say yes, and there is no legal claim of immediate self-defense (which even the US isn’t claiming regarding Syria), any use or threat of use of military force is illegal. Period. Full stop. Claiming that NATO or someone else said it was okay isn’t part of international law—the air war was illegal in Kosovo, and it would be illegal in Syria.

### Cui Bono?

But let’s go back a minute. Let’s remember that we *don’t* know for sure that it was a chemical weapon. We *don’t* know for sure that it was a weapon at all. Crucially, let’s remember we *don’t* have any evidence of who might have used such a weapon. So then what do we ask? Maybe we start with the age-old question, *Cui bono?* Who benefits?

It’s easier to say who loses—the Syrian people, most importantly the victims and their families. Whole communities are being decimated. (We shouldn’t forget that Americans will pay a price too—a new war will result in more military spending. That will create pressure on Congress to

cut domestic spending even further, cutting vital social programs even more.)

But who benefits is a little more complicated.

It's certainly not impossible that the Syrian regime, known to have had a chemical weapons arsenal, used such a weapon. If so, why? Despite remaining under pressure from sanctions and facing increasing international isolation, Damascus has been seeing some success on the battlefield. It's certainly possible a mid-level Syrian officer, worried about some past defeat and desperately afraid of being held accountable for it, might have chosen to use such a weapon to gain a gruesome battlefield victory despite the increase in the threat of direct military intervention. But it is very unlikely the regime's leadership would have made such a choice. Not because they "wouldn't kill their own people," they've been doing just that. But because they stood to lose far more than any potential gain. It's not impossible. But as brutal as this regime is, it isn't crazy. It's unlikely.

Then there's the other side, the diverse opposition whose strongest fighters are those claiming allegiance to Al Qaeda and similar extremist organizations. Those who benefit from this attack, are those eager for greater US and Western military intervention against the Assad regime in Damascus. Further, Al Qaeda and its offshoots have always been eager to get the US military—troops, warplanes, ships, bases, whatever—into their territory. It makes it so much easier to attack them there. Politically it remains what US counterintelligence agents long ago called a "recruitment tool" for Al Qaeda. They loved the Iraq war for that reason. They would love the Syrian war all the more if US targets were brought in. All the debate about "red lines," the domestic and international political pressure to "do something," the threats to the UN inspectors on the ground—who inside Syria do we think is cheering that on?

(And as for the opposition's capacity and/or willingness to use such weapons... we should also remember that the opposition includes some defectors. Who knows what skills and weapons access they brought with them? And do we really doubt that Al Qaeda wannabe extremists, many of them not even Syrians, would hesitate to kill civilians in a suburb of Damascus?)

### **UN Inspectors Pulled Out?**

The most dangerous signal of US intentions may be the call for the United Nations weapons inspectors to withdraw. To his credit, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon rejected the Obama administration's call, and kept the inspection team in place, to do its work. On the eve of the war in Iraq, forty-eight hours before US warplanes began their assault on Baghdad, George W. Bush issued an even more direct demand for UN weapons inspectors and humanitarian workers to be withdrawn. Then Secretary-General Kofi Annan pulled his team out, understandably afraid for their lives. But what if those scores of UN staffers had been given the choice to stay? Might the risk of killing dozens, scores of UN international staff, have made the United States pause for just a moment before beginning its assault? Maybe those staffers would have changed history. This time around, like before, diplomacy rather than military action is the only way to enable the UN inspectors to continue their work to find the truth.

Let's be clear. Any US military attack, cruise missiles or anything else, will not be to protect civilians—it will mean taking sides once again in a bloody, complicated civil war. And Al Qaeda would be very pleased.

This time, maybe the Obama administration isn't about to launch cruise missiles against Syria. Maybe there's still time to prevent it. Right now, those risking their lives on the ground to help the Syrian people are the UN inspectors. If the United States is really concerned about their safety, and recognizes the legitimacy of UN inspectors, the Obama administration should immediately engage with the UN leadership and with the Syrian, Russian and other relevant governments to insure their safety while they continue their crucial efforts. Cruise missiles will make that work impossible. What's needed now is tough diplomacy, not politically motivated military strikes that will make a horrific war even worse.

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blutopie

Will Apartheid Israel survive there NOT being a Israeli/Israeli Lobby-hoaxed ginned up attack on Syria and/or Iran?

NO WAY

Conducting YET ANOTHER war for Israel and her Israeli Lobby/Neocons is the moral obscenity

Israelis and her Israeli Lobby Neocons are not only DESPERATE for yet another Israeli/Israeli Lobby-hoaxed war in the Middle East, like they hoaxed us into the Iraq war with the Niger Yellowcake Forgeries (forged by Michael Ledeen/Mossad and then handed off to and stovepiped thru Doug Feith's Office of Special Plans) - they are the only ones who 'BENEFIT' from an attack on Syria.

No more wars in the Middle East to prop up Apartheid in Israel - it's time for an Israel sans Apartheid

It is an well worn Israeli maxim - 'When the Middle East burns no one remembers the Palestinians'. This is what Israel and her Neocons/Israeli Lobby are not only counting on but what they desperately need.

Cui bono? - Apartheid Israel.

Colin Powell needs to come out of book tour/speaking tour retirement and drop the dime on the Israelis and her Israeli Lobby who conned him into selling this nation down the river. It's the SAME neocons trying to hoax us into Syria (AND IRAN thru the Syrian backdoor) - Powell is the PERFECT man to turn state's evidence on the Israeli Lobby/Neocons

This would be like outing the Mossad/Michael Ledeen for the Niger Uranium Forgeries BEFORE we were hoaxed into attacking Iraq by the Israelis and her Israeli Lobby/Neocons

ReasonWithValues

Good article Bennis. But a lot of people who have been following this politics, or at least listening to people who are factual, fair and ethical in their research and reporting, know that this is messy, complicated, unpredictable and no one side is the really "right side". This is not like someone shooting someone in cold blood unprovoked or giving someone an unprovoked facial burn and then walking away or denying responsibility. But when we have people, as in the latter cases, walking away scot free, with too many lawyers preferring to represent the guy with money, connection and legal savvy, or defending laws that should not be defended, I guess it might be easy to create false dichotomies such as: "good versus evil" or "us versus them" or "political my way or the highway" or "we are perfect and they are evil" abroad and in

foreign policies...while domestically the bad guys are actually getting away with a lot of terrible things.

As the joke goes, "This is like the mafia becoming the morality police!"

We've got people here spying on their own citizens, we've got corporations taking our money and spying on us, we've got increase in poverty, disparity and inequality, we've got increase in injustice when guys at the top are getting away with brazen financial and physical crimes, with blatant violation of good laws. There are even bad guys here who are shaping laws. Wow...with what moral authority are these systems going to go in and change other countries, cultures and their disputes? As one guy noted, "They are stopping and frisking innocent people in their own towns, and cannot do proper policing (without too much intrusion into people's rights or without outright neglect of some communities)...how are they going to bring justice to Assad's regime or more meaning to the rebels?"

These military interventions are no longer about "national security", "fighting terrorism" or "fighting for justice, truth or to help people". That is the rhetoric...like a corrupt doctor suggesting a treatment you don't need by saying, "Trust me. It is good for you!", or a lazy or corrupt or working-for-the-other-guy lawyer saying, "We don't do it that way. But I got a great suggestion and action for you! Just sign here!"

As one American, who has not lost his sense of humor yet, joked on a webpage, "I am beginning to feel like that crazy desperate narcissist, who does even understand or..."

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**rollzone**

hello. the great moral tragedy is selling them chemical weapons- to later use against them. we are invincible- but what if one of our gleaming ships is sunk? will not Russia immediately resupply all the airplanes we destroy? did our military not posture itself ahead of any decision by our Commander? will the truth be heard on live TV by Assad? do we the people ever get the truth

**theshadowknows**

Intercepted phone calls that will be presented by the Obama administration as proof that Assad was behind last week's chemical weapons attack in Syria actually suggest that the attack was not ordered by the Syrian government. [CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFO](#)

**limoman**

You are using Alex Jones website to back up your comments shadow?? You are slipping ;)

**theshadowknows**

First time I have seen you resort to "killing the messenger" rather than argue the facts. If anyone is slipping it is you. Remember, even a broke clock is right twice a day.

I am not a Christian, but if the Bible is correct on something, I would not hesitate to quote it.

And, on the other hand, if my beloved mother said something wrong, I would not quote her, no matter how much she insisted I do.

Only facts matter, not who issues the fact. Even the Bush administration must have been right about something, at some point. (I can't think of when or what but there must have been SOMETHING Cheney said that was true.)

And even Hitler was right about autobahns, aspirin and Volkswagens.

(Yea, Yea. I know Godwin's Law - but I think you get my point. We don't agree on much, limoman, but you do stand out here as intelligent among all the cretins, churls and children who troll here nowadays.)

**Shluf**

It is fanciful to think that there can be a diplomatic resolution to the civil war in Syria. Assad's patrons, namely Russia, want him to hold onto power, no matter how many civilians die. The ICC can do nothing, because even if there were a ruling, Assad would ignore it. The fact is, the Left is in a quandary. The reflexive support for any enemy of America makes Assad a sympathetic figure. However, the main opposition force is al-Qaida, an even more avowed enemy of the US. Civilian deaths only seem to matter to the Left if the US or an ally, especially Israel, is involved. Obama could have supported the opposition two years ago when it was not dominated by al-Qaida. Now the options are limited. What he can do is hit Syria hard enough, perhaps even getting lucky and killing Assad, and thereby make the next bloodthirsty dictator think twice about using chemical weapons.

**sry123**

I agree intervention without regime change or a total destruction of the Syrian military (which is, in effect, regime change) will be unlikely to accomplish anything and the costs of going so far as regime change are

probably not worth it. That said, there are few dumber cop outs than claiming the ICC can be useful here. The ICC is only useful after the belligerents in a war have lost power or if it is used in a non-war setting to prevent war criminals from traveling, etc. Until then, any indictment is empty. Assad surely knows that he is fighting for his life, unless some other country agrees to give him asylum. Any ICC action would have no incentive on him not to use chemical weapons (since he would only be tried once he is removed from power, which would result in his death anyway at the hands of the Syrian rebels) and may tie the world's hands when it comes to removing him from power.

**theshadowknows**

Hypocrite Central: U.S., Britain and Israel have Used Chemical Weapons within the Last 10 Years

Those condemning Syria have themselves recently used chemical weapons. [CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFO](#)

**truth\_meet\_beauty**

Having followed your links, I don't see any evidence that the US or the UK used chemical weapons in the sense that most people understand chemical weapons. Why don't you just tell us what "chemical weapons" the US and UK used, and we can decide if most rational people consider those chemical weapons. I mean, do you consider gunpowder to be a chemical weapon?

**ruffsoft**

White phosphorus; radiation tipped missiles.(and remember Agent Orange from Vietnam?)  
Thousands of children born with serious defects, radiation poisoning, etc.....in  
Iraq, suffering now, dying now.

Let's not play games with words. The US has used chemical weapons in Iraq and Afghanistan recently. We embraced Saddam after he used chemical weapons against Iran (which Reagan was secretly arming), which were made of materials from the US and Germany.

Hypocrisy, double standards, word games.....

**theshadowknows**

Then you must be blind or you did not read the links I provided. Solid chemicals are just as much chemicals as gaseous chemicals. Only a desperate and corrupt lawyer would try to split that hair.

And no gunpowder is not a chemical weapon, it only makes guns work.

White phosphorus is a chemical weapon as even the United States says it is.

Depleted uranium is also a chemical weapon.

Perhaps you should take a refresher course in chemistry, if you ever had one in the first place.

I also refer you to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

I also ask that readers research (you can find your own links if you don't trust mine) on all the serious birth defects that have occurred by the U.S. and NATO use of depleted uranium in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

And anyone who has fired a willy peter munition knows that it harms not just the target but can kill or maim anyone in the vicinity.

More importantly, you all should know that it is the United States, specifically the Reagan administration, that provided chemical weapons (of the kind even you could not dispute, tmb) to Saddam and trained his troops in their use, who then used them against the Kurds -- and how the Syrian regime first got chemical weapons also.

Officially U.S. production of chemical weapons stopped in 1969 however the U.S. did not ban them, officially, until 1997 and the stockpiles still exist.

But the hypocrisy of the Obama and Cameron governments goes beyond this argument over chemical weapons. There is no difference between being killed by a chemical weapon and being killed by a non-chemical weapons. Air-borne chemical weapons were banned internationally not so much because they were more horrible than any other weapon but because they were ineffective. When the wind changes, the chemical often came back to kill the perpetrator.

This is also another reason many people are sceptical of the charges against Assad. No government is going to use such weapons. Terrorists on the other hand are not constrained by such concerns.

Furthermore, the upcoming days of bombing of Syria will undoubtedly kill more civilians than have the reported chemical attacks.

And what about the innocent civilians that have been killed in Obama's drone assassination

attacks?

The administration's...

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### truth\_meet\_beauty

Thanks, but I don't need to take any chemistry courses. White phosphorus is no more a "chemical weapon" than gunpowder. You know that gunpowder is a chemical, right? If not, maybe YOU need to take some chemistry.

Anyone who has fired an artillery shell also knows that that it harms not just the target, but anyone in the vicinity. So, does that make it a "chemical weapon"?

You have provided no links, nor are any links available, which prove that depleted uranium has caused "serious birth defects" in "Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya". The ONE link to a scientific article that you provided, went to an article that said that the birth defects in Fallujah were most likely due to folate (Vitamin B9) deficiency. That article speculated a link to lead poisoning from all the bullets that were apparently flying through the air there. So, add lead to your list of "chemical weapons" that the US has supposedly used.

So, the Reagan administration provided "chemical weapons" to Hussein? Specifically, what chemical weapons? Mustard gas? VX? Sarin?

Let's not obfuscate things with assertions of hypocrisy by Obama. We can agree he is a hypocrite. I am more interested in your vague statement that the US and UK "used chemical weapons" in the last ten years. Prove THAT, before you start heaping more unsubstantiated accusations out there.

### theshadowknows

1) It is not the gunpowder in a bullet that kills people it is the bullet. Bullets are not chemical weapons.

2) It is the white phosphorus that kills and maims. WP munitions are chemical weapons. The use of incendiary weapons against civilians was banned by signatory countries in the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol III. The USA signed Protocols I and II on 24 March 1995 under the Clinton Administration (and the amended article II on 24 May 1999) and later Protocols III, IV, and V, on 21 January 2009 under the Obama Administration. The U.S. used WP extensively in the battles of Fallujah in Iraq. [CLICK HERE](#)

Israel was widely criticized after its use of white phosphorus in Operation Cast Lead in 2009 caused civilian deaths in Gaza.

The only one obfuscating things here is you.

Chemical weapons are not limited to gases. You might argue that WP and depleted uranium are not WMDs but you can not argue that they are not chemical weapons. And there are plenty of people who would argue with you that depleted uranium is, indeed, a WMD.

And most sane people would include white phosphorus and depleted uranium in the chemical weapons ban.

Depleted Uranium – Far Worse Than 9/11. Depleted Uranium Dust - Public Health Disaster For The People Of Iraq and Afghanistan [CLICK HERE](#)

Depleted uranium used by US forces blamed for birth defects and cancer in Iraq [CLICK HERE](#)

Depleted uranium From Wikipedia [CLICK HERE](#)

Depleted Uranium Contamination is Still Spreading in Iraq [CLICK HERE](#)

and here is the site for the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons (which only the U.S. and its allies have used [CLICK HERE](#)

and here are a series of articles from The Guardian on depleted uranium [CLICK HERE](#)

Here is a picture of Donald Rumsfeld (then the special envoy of Pres. Reagan shaking hands with Saddam Hussein as the chemical weapons were delivered. [CLICK HERE](#)

US gave Saddam blessing to use toxins against Iranians [CLICK HERE](#)

CIA 'helped Saddam Hussein carry out chemical weapons attack on Iran' in 1988 under Ronald Reagan [CLICK HERE](#)

How Reagan Armed Saddam with Chemical Weapons [CLICK HERE](#)

and there are many, many other reports on this topic.

I stand by my point, that the U.S. is hypocritical and immoral in the outrage

over chemical weapons deaths. Chemical weapons are just the new WMD excuse for going to war once again against a Muslim country.

But being hypocritical in this Syria quagmire is not the main accusation against the Obama administration. That is just my opinion, and the opinion of the authors of the articles I linked you to, on the "outrage" now expressed by Obama, Kerry and others.

The real story is the relationship of the CIA to Al Qaeda and Obama's use of Al Qaeda mercenaries posing as "rebels" in both Libya and now in Syria -- as we have discussed for many, many months now in these blogs. Obama and his criminal partners started the Syrian war; imported, trained and armed Al Qaeda mercenaries in this war (as they did in Libya); and now are blaming Assad for what Obama's hirelings did (I linked you guys to photos and videos of the Al Qaeda/Al Nusra terrorists firing the chemical weapons from artillery in this other article in The Nation. [CLICK HERE](#)).

Obama and his criminal partners must be stopped.

#### truth\_meet\_beauty

Ho-hum. Just more of the usual from shadow. You just try to bury facts under verbiage.

That wiki item on DU states that the WHO has found NO carcinogenic effects, despite what your link to the anonymous website RT states.

NOWHERE on the wiki list of chemical warfare agents will you find DU.

WP has been banned for use on civilians. The US used it enemy combatants, which is perfectly legal.

I only asked you ONE question, which you DID NOT answer, so I'll repeat it, and wait for an answer: WHAT SPECIFIC CHEMICAL WEAPONS "were provided ... To Saddam" by the Reagan administration?

#### theshadowknows

Former congressman Dennis Kucinich (D., Ohio) said today that striking Syria would turn the United States military into "al-Qaeda's air force."

Kucinich, who voted against the Iraq War and campaigned for the Democratic nomination for president in 2004 and 2008, lambasted the idea that Obama could act without congressional authorization, which he said would be a violation of the Constitution. He also warned that intervening in Syria would entangle the United States in another war in the Middle East and encourage Islamists who are fighting the forces of Syrian president Assad.

#### teelws

It is not possible to stop a fire by adding more fuel. Allowing more weapons into Syria, for either side in the conflict (which is far more complex than two sides) is a mistake. Using weapons to influence the conflict is an even greater mistake. It is only an easy way to make us feel better about all the diplomatic errors we have made. Therefore we have to think this through more clearly.

The United States is not the most important player in stopping this war. The burden falls to the countries on Syria's border; Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon. The diplomatic effort by the US should aim at these countries, developing a unified response, helping refugees and stopping movement of all goods and services into and out of Syria that promote military conflict. This is no easy task, but there are no easy, simple tasks in stopping a war.

Next you have to do the one thing militaries everywhere are not good at, promoting disarmament of the combatants. Drawing down the weapons in a violent region takes time, money, diplomacy and incredible patience in the face of criticism from war hawks of any political stripe. But the argument about money is spurious; using a cruise missile is expensive too, it is only faster. The problem is that missiles may be precise, but they are far from accurate in solving a crisis - in fact they make it worse. We need the opposite approach, buy out the guns, scale down the weapons. Remove the fuel from the conflict and the fire will burn out eventually. It is not romantic or popular, and it is slow, but fires do go out. Unfortunately our leaders almost inevitably choose the violent approach, as the authors above point out, and history often proves the leaders wrong.

#### otto skorzeny

more wars to create a greater israel. israel already selling drilling rights in syria (golan)

aprescoup

"Despite Secretary of State John Kerry's claim that a chemical attack was "undeniable," we still don't know for sure that it was a chemical weapon...."

And that is all that he claimed in his speech. He attempted to link the fact that an attack happened to Assad with allusions, connotations, and all kinds of word-smithing, but never came to claim that Syria was responsible.

Here's the transcript - it stinks to high heaven. What is "undeniable" is that an attack happened, duh...

Plausible deniability? I don't think the public will buy it. The new Powell-Kerry doctrine: Just Lie!

Bill Pearlman

The IDF can handle any threat to Israel out of Syria. Other than that. I don't care if they kill each other for the next thousand years. Thins the herd

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