

French General: Give Geneva II a Chance

by Christine Bierre

PARIS, Sept. 6 (Nouvelle Solidarité)—Gen. Henri Paris (ret.), former head of the French Second Armored Division, and former military advisor to Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy (1981-84), and to Defense Ministers Jean-Pierre Chevènement (1988-91) and Pierre Joxe (1991-93), was interviewed by Christine Bierre of Solidarity & Progress on Sept. 3. The general urged French leaders, over and over again, to allow a Geneva II peace conference, as proposed by the UN, to work, and to get back to the negotiating table.

“I am against this intervention,” said General Paris. “It would be, in my opinion, an enormous error, because it will set to flames the entire Near and Middle East, but especially because it will block the road to negotiations, and the solution of this crisis is to go to a Geneva II. An attack would eliminate the possibility of Geneva II, or at the very least, lead to its postponement. All wars must necessarily stop, and this war cannot end without negotiations. Therefore, I’m in favor of negotiations.”

The reporter asked whether a third actor—neither the Assad government, nor the rebels—might have unleashed the chemical weapons in the Ghouta suburb of the Syrian capital city Damascus, in an attempt to provoke the crisis, as happened in Lebanon recently, where bombs were first set off against the Shi’ite community, and then, afterwards, in the Sunni community, in an attempt to get a war going between them. Fortunately, the

community leaders were intelligent enough not to fall into the trap. The general responded:

“It’s absolutely not impossible. At any rate, it is certain that some countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, want to see a Western intervention in Syria, because they are unable to do it themselves. The civil war in Syria, beyond the conflict between the government forces and the rebels, is a war between Shi’ites and Sunnis, between Saudi Arabia and Iran; and Syria’s allies, the Chinese and the Russians, are supporting Iran and Syria against the West, which is supporting the rebels.

“All that reinforces my opinion that everything must be done to promote political negotiations.”

A ‘Strange Soldier’?

You might think that I am an odd officer, a strange soldier who wants to push for negotiations, he continued. But I would like to remind everyone that the aim of a war is to lead to negotiations; the aim is not war, but peace.

Asked whether the military on this side of the Atlantic had the same doubts expressed by U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey, in his letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee of July 19 (see Sept. 6 *EIR*), General Paris stated that there was no consensus at that level, and that the military is as divided as French public opinion. Paris underlined that there was also opposition to the war among the French Socialists, who largely support an intervention in Syria. “I understand the interventionists [among the Socialists]; I don’t throw stones at them. . . . Chemical weapons are disastrous, destructive, and one must understand that behind the use of these weapons, there is another option which is being raised, that of bacteriological weapons.”

To the question of whether or not France, which needed some support (transports and logistics) from the U.S. for its military attack against Mali last January, were not obliged to come to the support of the U.S. against Syria, even though this policy is not at all in the French



Gen. Henri Paris (ret.)

interest, Paris said, “Of course, of course, of course, an alliance must be respected. But NATO’s Article 5, which sets the conditions for such an intervention, says that an intervention can be conducted through whatever suitable means are available to a country.

“There are extremely strong presumptions that chemical weapons were used in Syria,” he continued. “What we don’t know is if there was a provocation from the rebels, or whether Bashar al-Assad were not himself outmaneuvered by others in his camp. At any rate, before an intervention, this question must be clarified, and while doing this, we must say, we have to go to Geneva

II. We must think about how to go to the negotiating table and force the government and the rebels to discuss, without conditions. Discussions must be held with those on the ground, the government and the Syrian National Council.”

To the question of whether there are people in the Socialist Party who can help the government move in this direction, General Paris said, “Yes, the Socialist Party, including among its leading circles, is not unanimous in support of intervention—far from it. Note that [President François] Hollande [a Socialist] himself, is hesitant: The intervention is not occurring. If he wants it so much, why doesn’t he give the order to go?”

An Extremely Murky Affair

Finally, asked whether he has the impression that the Elysée [Presidential Palace] listens enough to highly qualified retired officials such as himself, he said: “The Elysée listens; several generals have expressed themselves. The UN investigators have to publish their conclusions. . . . This affair is extremely murky, very problematic. I must say that I, myself, cannot understand the purely military logic for such an action. I am a soldier, and yet I confess that I do not understand the utilization in the city of these chemical weapons. Conventional weapons would have been better. It was a mistake, simply from the military angle.”