

Syria Crisis Opposition parties agree crisis roadmap

AFP, Beirut

Syria's main domestic and exiled opposition groups yesterday said they had agreed a joint draft roadmap for the first time, calling for a transitional governing body and an end to the brutal conflict.

The draft document comes after representatives from the exiled Syrian National Coalition and the domestic National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC) met in Paris.

"This is the first time that we have an agreement between both organisations, the Coalition and the NCCDC," said Khalaf Dahowd, a member of the NCCDC's executive bureau.

Dahowd said representatives from the two opposition groups met in Paris from Sunday to Tuesday, at talks hosted by France but carried out without international involvement.

He said the two sides had agreed a draft document based on UN Security Council resolutions on Syria and the so-called Geneva communiqué that emerged from peace talks in the Swiss city in 2012.

In a statement, the National Coalition said the document "specifies that the primary goal of negotiations with the Assad regime is to establish a civil, democratic, pluralistic system that ensures equal rights and duties for all Syrians."

The National Coalition is the key political representative of Syria's opposition and is officially recognised by much of the international community.

It insists that Syria's President Bashar al-Assad must step down from any resolution of the country's nearly four-year-old conflict.

The NCCDC, is part of the country's small so-called "tolerated" opposition, operating inside Syria under tight restrictions.



This image grab allegedly shows a ISIS militant destroying the statue of Lamassu, an Assyrian diety, with a jackhammer in the northern Iraqi Governorate of Nineveh. The five-minute video released on Wednesday shows militants knocking statues off their plinths, inset, in the Mosul museum and smashing them to pieces with sledgehammers. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

FOREIGN CASH DONATIONS Hillary's presidential dream threatened

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Revelations about millions of dollars donated by foreign governments to the Clinton Foundation while Hillary Clinton was serving as the US Secretary of State raised potentially perilous conflict-of-interest questions yesterday that risk dogging her if she decides to run for president later this year.

New financial disclosures by the charitable foundation, which was created by former President Bill Clinton after he left office, show that during her tenure as America's top diplomat large donations came in from an array of foreign nations, some of which, such as Qatar, Kuwait and Oman, had complicated relationships with the US.

Responding to inquiries from The Washington Post, the Foundation said that all the donations were governed by a 2008 agreement, put in place when Hillary was seeking the

Democratic nomination that year, and designed to curb all notion of countries giving in hope of favours in return. But it said one gift, from Algeria, fell beyond its scope and should have received special clearance by the State Department. That clearance was never sought.

Hillary formally joined the board of the Foundation in 2013, after leaving the State Department. In the months since she has been earning speaking fees in her own right, sometimes \$200,000 for an appearance.

The fees as well as her past close ties to big donors on Wall Street are inevitable obstacles to any attempt she may make to strike a populist tone as income inequality becomes a top theme of the impending race. The questions now being raised regarding the Foundation add a new dimension, however – how tightly were ethical rules applied in taking cash from foreign powers.



'Military threat from east to remain' despite truce

Says Ukraine president as ceasefire takes concrete shape

BBC ONLINE

Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko has said a "military threat from the east" will remain even if a ceasefire holds between government troops and pro-Russian rebels in the east.

Poroshenko's warning is widely seen as an indirect reference to Russia.

Ukraine and the West accuse Russia of helping the rebels with weapons and soldiers - a claim denied by Moscow.

Ukraine's military said on Friday that three soldiers had been killed in the past 24 hours despite the truce.

That followed 48 hours during which the Ukrainian military said it had suffered no deaths, boosting hopes that the ceasefire might hold.

Both Ukraine and the rebels say they are now withdrawing their heavy weapons from the front line under the terms of the ceasefire agreed in Minsk, Belarus.

The process is yet to be officially confirmed by international monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The ceasefire came into effect on 15 February but the rebels seized the key town of Debaltsevo just days later.

Fighting began in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and

Luhansk regions - known as Donbas - last April, a month after Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula.

Almost 5,800 people have died since then, the UN has estimated, although it believes the real figure could be considerably higher.

Speaking at Ukraine's National Defence University in Kiev on Friday, Poroshenko said: "Even under the most optimistic scenario in Donbas... the military threat from the east would unfortunately remain."

He said this would require Ukraine to constantly strengthen the country's defensive capabilities.

On Thursday, Ukraine said it began the pullout of 100mm calibre artillery from the front line, after none of its soldiers were killed for two days. The separatist rebels in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic say they have pulled out hundreds of pieces of artillery and other weapons over the past several days.

The OSCE special monitoring mission has said it observed movement of trucks and howitzers in several rebel-held areas.

Under terms agreed in Minsk, both Ukraine's government forces and the rebels must pull out their heavy weapons, creating a buffer zone of at least 50km (30 miles).

N Korea vows 'merciless' war against US

AFP, Seoul

North Korea vowed to wage a "merciless, sacred war" against the United States on Thursday, days before the launch of annual joint South Korea-US military exercises that have incensed Pyongyang.

"Nuclear weapons are not a monopoly of the US," the ruling party's official newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, warned in an editorial carried by the state KCNA news agency.

"The US is seriously mistaken if it thinks its mainland is safe," the editorial added.

North Korea "will wage a merciless sacred war against the US now that the latter has chosen confrontation", the Rodong Sinmun said.

North Korea regularly ramps up the bellicose rhetoric before the start of the annual joint military exercises that always see a sharp surge in tensions on the divided peninsula.

Seoul and Washington insist they are defensive in nature, but they are condemned by Pyongyang as provocative rehearsals for invasion.

North Korea had offered a moratorium on nuclear testing if this year's joint drills were cancelled -- a proposal rejected by Washington as an "implicit threat" to carry out a fourth nuclear test.



Sarah Palin drops ISIS bomb

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The rise of ISIS in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere was directly caused by the administration of Barack Obama, former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin said on Thursday.

Palin spoke Thursday evening -- to rousing applause -- at the Conservative Political Action Conference, an annual meeting of right-wing activists and politicians.

She criticised the president for not cracking down on the militants and said he should have done more to prevent ISIS from growing.

When troops were withdrawn from Iraq, experts advised to keep a residual force to maintain order in the country, Palin said.

"The rise of ISIS is the direct result of this administration's refusal to heed that warning," Palin said.

Palin also said that Islamist militants now control more territory than before the US began the War on Terror. That claim could not be independently verified.

Judge ends 'cover-up' case against Argentine leader

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An Argentinian judge has dismissed the accusation made by state prosecutors that President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner conspired to cover up Iran's alleged role in a deadly bombing in 1994.

Judge Daniel Rafecas ruled he would "discontinue" the case, which had been revived this month, after its initial prosecutor, Alberto Nisman, was found shot dead last month. "The evidence gathered far from meets the minimal standard," a statement from the judiciary said.

Gerardo Pollicita, prosecuting, renewed Mr Nisman's investigation into whether Ms Fernandez impeded the inquiry into the bombing to safeguard a grains-for-oil deal with Tehran. Mr Nisman had filed the complaint days before he died on 18 January under mysterious circumstances.

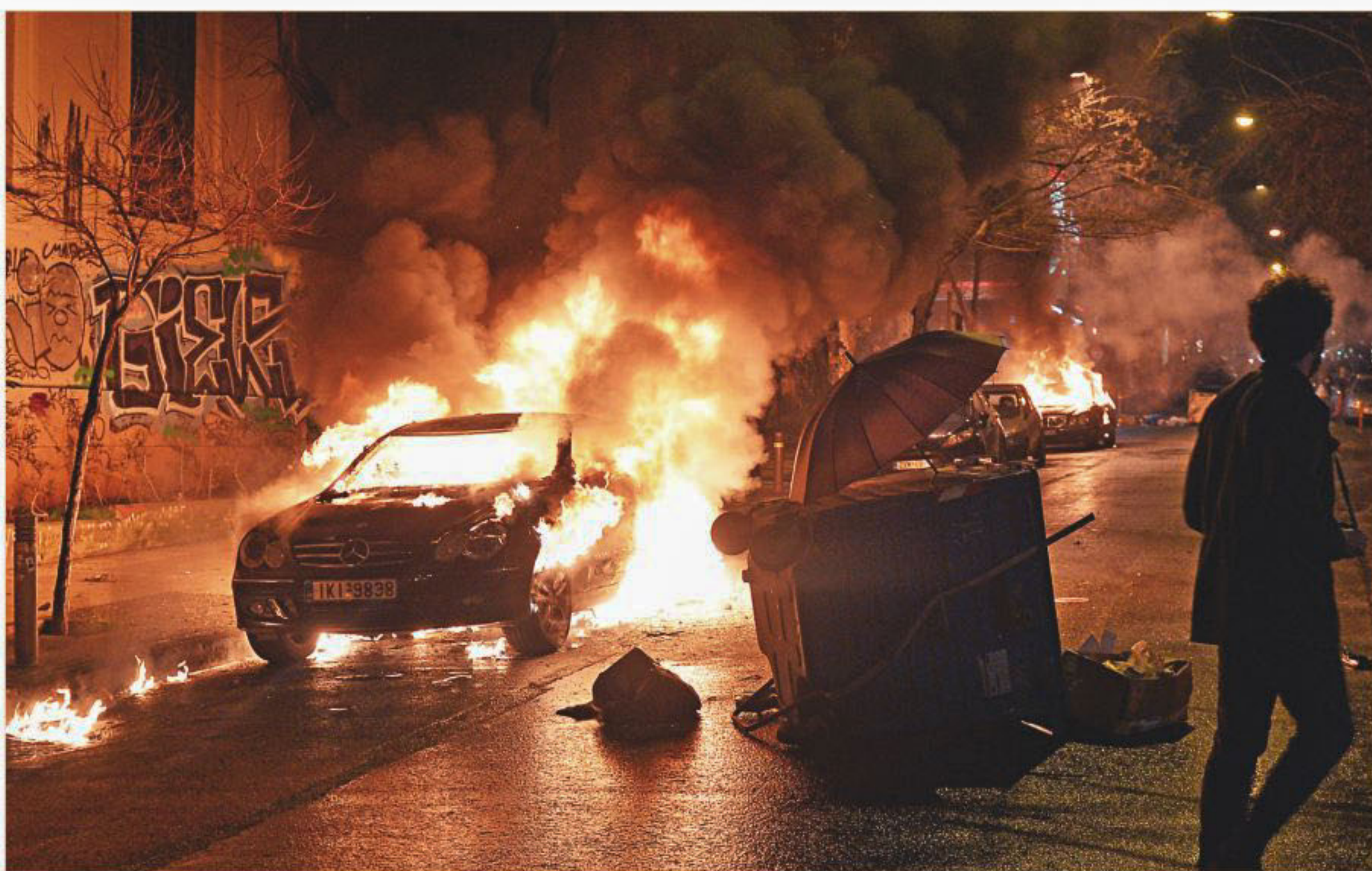
Ms Fernandez called the claims "absurd".

Iran has consistently denied involvement in the attack on a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994, which killed 85. Mr Pollicita is expected to appeal against the decision.

Argentina is to replace its spy agency with a new intelligence service under a bill approved by Congress yesterday in response to the scandal over Mr Nisman's death.

The Chamber of Deputies voted 131-71 to create the Federal Intelligence Agency, which the government says will improve the accountability of espionage agents. President Fernandez's government has claimed rogue agents tricked Mr Nisman into making false accusations against her.

Ms Fernandez's chief of staff, Anibal Fernandez, said the agency will be up and running in 90 days, marking a "change of paradigm" that will improve the integrity of Argentina's secret services.



A man walks past burning car in central Athens' Exarchia district, after it was set on fire by young anarchists at the end of a demonstration on Thursday. Several hundreds of people protested in Athens against a compromise loan deal between Greece and its international creditors.

PHOTO: AFP

How Hawking is still alive?

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

On April 20, 2009, a moment arrived that doctors had foretold for decades. Stephen Hawking, a scientist who overcame debilitating disease to become the world's most renowned living physicist, was on the cusp of death. The University of Cambridge released grim prognoses. Hawking, diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) at the age of 21, was described as "very ill" and "undergoing tests" at the hospital. Newspapers ran obituary-esque articles. It seemed time was up for the man who so eloquently explained it.

But, as is his custom, Hawking survived.

Hawking shouldn't be able to do the things he now does. The 73-year-old shouldn't be able to deliver meditations on the existence of God. He shouldn't be able to fret over artificial intelligence or humanity's capacity for self-destruction. And he most definitely shouldn't be able to attend the BAFTAs — Britain's academy awards — settled inside the wheelchair that has carried him for decades, expressing admiration for a recent



biopic that paid homage to his struggle. But yet, he is. And he does.

It's difficult to overstate the lethality of ALS, the condition with which Hawking lives. The disorder can befall anyone. It first brings muscle weakness, then wasting, then paralysis, ripping away the ability to speak and swallow and even breathe. The ALS Association says the average lifespan of someone diagnosed with the condition is between two and five years. More than 50 percent make it

past year three. Twenty percent make it past year five. From there, the number plummets. Less than 5 percent make it past two decades.

And then there's Hawking. He has passed that two-decade mark twice — first in 1983, then in 2003. It's now 2015.

So what makes Hawking different from the rest? Just luck? Or has the transcendent nature of his intellect somehow stalled what seemed an imminent fate? No one's quite sure. Not even Hawking himself, who can expound at length on the mechanics that govern the universe.

Hawking's battle with ALS was different from the beginning. And those differences, scientists say, partly explain his miraculous longevity. The onset of ALS normally occurs later in life — the average age of diagnosis is 55 — but Hawking's symptoms materialized when he was very young.

Though the early diagnosis resigned him to a life of sickness, it also granted him a chance at surviving the disease longer than those who are diagnosed much later. But still the mystery remains like all his works.

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