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Secular Syria Rebels Mull Rejoining Govt to Fight al-Qaeda

By Jason Ditz

December 4, 2013

With the Geneva II peace conference looming on January 22, Free Syrian Army (FSA) commander Gen. Salim Idris has announced his is dropping the demand for President Bashar Assad to resign before the talks, saying he's content with talks toward an eventual transition at the end of the negotiation process.

That may not sound like much on the surface, but it points to what officials say is a significant shift in the secularist rebel perspective, as they consider merging with the Assad government to end their mutual fighting and instead focus on the war against al-Qaeda and the rest of the Islamist rebels.

Gen. Idris addressed the prospect very directly in his comments, saying that the growing FSA fighting with al-Qaeda has left them fighting a war on two different fronts. As foreign Islamists continue to flock to al-Qaeda factions like Jabhat al-Nusra, that's a problem that's only going to get worse, as some 5,500 foreign fighters in al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) alone look to dominate the rebel-controlled northwest.

The FSA is mostly military defectors, and re-merging with the military itself might not be particularly difficult, but with their fighters poorly equipped and struggling to cope with a surge in al-Qaeda forces, it isn't clear how readily they will be able to turn the tide in rebel-held territory, even with the Assad government's help.

