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Position Paper

A Long War of Attrition in Syria

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The 15th of July marked the 16th month of the Syrian Revolution. Although the activist group that first led the popular movement and brought about its political frameworks had intended for it to be peaceful, violence in Syria has been intensified. The bloody methods of repression adopted by the regime, regional and international intervention, and the inability of Arab and international regimes to find and impose a political solution to the crisis in Syria, contributed to this escalation of aggression.

A series of meetings held during the past few days indicated that the crisis has already evolved from an internal popular movement demanding freedom and political change, to an extremely complex international predicament. These meetings, whether with the opposition or Arab, regional and international parties, do not suggest that the crisis will be resolved any time soon. Furthermore, it has become apparent that the revolution is gradually becoming a war of attrition that may persist between the different forces of the revolution on one side, and the controlling regime, its military forces and militias on the other.

The Geneva Conference: The Coalition Government Card

On Saturday, 30 June 2012, the Syria Contact Group held a meeting in Geneva. The group consists of international forces such as the United States and Russia, a number of Arab countries, and Turkey. The meeting was preceded by optimistic expectations of a U.S.-Russian consensus regarding the future of the regime. During preparations for the conference, Russia had failed to convince Washington and a number of Arab capitals to include Iran in the meeting, and thus it and Saudi Arabia were left out. Despite intensive talks between the U. S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, the two countries did not come to agree on a decisive and definitive solution in Syria. The meeting made some progress but not enough to bring about noteworthy developments in the conflicting international positions.

The dispute between Russia and China on one side and the Europeans States, participating Arab countries and Turkey on the other, revolved around transition and al-Assad's fate, as well as assessing the responsibility of the two parties involved in the escalating armed confrontation in the country. Al-Assad's future, in particular, was one of the issues raised in the project draft submitted by the UN and Arab envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan. Annan proposed the formation of a national coalition government that includes the opposition and some of the regime's figures, and possesses absolute authority to manage the transition period. However, it would exclude anyone whose existence is an impediment to the transition process. Although the Annan proposal did not straightforwardly mention the exclusion of al-Assad, it was rather obvious that was the intention.

In the end, the Russians and the Americans could only bridge their differences by using an obscure compromise text. For the first time, the Americans, the Arabs and the Turks agreed on meeting the violence of regime forces with equal violence from the opposition; and for the first time, the Russians agreed to address the process of political transition in Syria. The fate of al-Assad, however, remains obscure as the final statement concluded with the recommendation of an agreement on the formation of a coalition government that exercises full authority and did not mention the exclusion of any parties. Nonetheless, this was not the only point of criticism directed toward the Geneva statement for it was also devoid of any timetables and references that render it an internationally binding decision.

From Geneva to Paris: Conflicting Views on Al-Assad's Departure

After the Friends of Syria International Working Group on Sanctions on Syria meeting, Russia and the United States hastened to provide their different interpretations of what was agreed upon in Geneva. The U.S. Secretary of State emphasised that Al-Assad will not remain in power and American and Western officials indicated that after having objected for such a long time, the Russians agreed in Geneva that Syria is approaching a transition of power and that the new government, which will have full authority to lead

the transition, will have no place for al-Assad in Syria's future. The Russian Foreign Ministry did not comment on the issue of power transfer but denied in an official statement that Moscow agreed to the exclusion of al-Assad and pointed out that his fate must be left to the consent of the Syrian people – though it did not explain how the consensus should be reached.

In an atmosphere of disagreement, it became evident that the Friends of Syria conference held in Paris on Friday, 6 July 2012, would be an opportunity to announce the Western-Arab-Turkish interpretation of the Geneva Convention. As a result, and because of the international and regional commotion over Syria, the Russians and the Chinese boycotted the meeting, illustrating that the Geneva agreement is the most that can be achieved at this stage.

The escalation of international disputes over Syria was the subject of an interview with Kofi Annan published by The Guardian on the day of the conference,, as his absence from the Paris meeting was deemed significant. He criticised the competition of Russia and the West for Damascus and declared, "Syria will face a wide-spread civil war unless Russia, the West and some Arab states stop their destructive rivalry, impose a cease-fire and launch a political process." He also stated that despite disagreements at the earlier international conference in Geneva in June, the support of the entire UN Security Council for a political transition in Damascus was a significant achievement that should not be squandered. "We are trying to implement some of the decisions taken in Geneva, most importantly exploring on the ground the most effective way to stop the violence and get them thinking of the political process."

About the opposition's criticism of Geneva, Annan stated, "I understand the reaction of the Syrian opposition. Maybe in their shoes I would have done the same or gone further because they didn't get 100% of what they wanted. But it doesn't mean they got nothing."

The Friends of Syria conference concluded as might have been expected. It not only underscored the departure of the regime but requested the Security Council issue a statement regarding the political movement in Syria under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter?. It also requested that the Council promise to increase humanitarian aid for the Syrian people and civilian aid to members of the opposition.

This comes in accordance with the statements Clinton made in Paris calling for the punishment of Russia and China for disrupting the process of reaching an international agreement on change in Syria. The Paris conference seems to have displayed the boundaries separating those who support the revolution and those who work to maintain the regime. Also, as was expected, opposition leaders, especially those of the Syrian National Council, left the meeting and harshly criticised its outcomes and failure relative to earlier Friends of Syria conferences.

The Opposition and the Cairo Conference: A Dispute over representation

Between the Geneva and Paris meetings, the opposition was invited by the Arab League to hold a conference in Cairo (2-3 July 2012) under its patronage. Attended by about 300 opposition leaders and activists, some from within Syria, it was postponed several times and aimed to unite and reconcile opposition forces on the basis of a common perception of the transitional phase and post-al-Assad Syria. Because the Cairo conference came in wake of the UN International Working Group meeting in Geneva and the ambiguity of the ensuing Geneva statement, most conference participants were quick to stress that no transition is possible in the presence of al-Assad (which was also stated in conference documents).

The conference was marred by strong disputes about two main issues: the future of the opposition as a political body and the status of the Kurdish minority. Most rejected the demands of the Kurdish national forces that participated in the conference and insisted on the term "Kurdish people" in the section on Kurds' rights; this led to their withdrawal

even though Abdulbaset Sieda, a Kurdish activist and current chairman of the national council, and a key participant, did not approve. The issue that demonstrated continuous disagreement among opposition forces, especially the coordinating body and the national council, was whether there was a need to form a monitoring committee after the adjournment of the conference. What this proposal implies is that this committee will automatically become the opposition's political representative, thus ending the primary role of the national council though leaders believe it has the greatest degree of legitimacy to represent the revolution.

Participants finally agreed on two major documents. The first pertains to the shared vision of the political transition and highlights the demand of a complete overturn of the regime's power. The second was entitled "The National Patriotic Promise: Justice, Democracy, and Pluralism" and its perception of the future Syria did not differ from that of the national council and other opposition forces that met in Istanbul a few months later. Still, the lack of agreement on the formation of a follow-up committee clearly indicated that agreement on the vision does not imply the creation of a single body that brings together the opposition and its figures. Furthermore, the opposition's political map is likely to remain as is, and the Cairo conference may have been the last attempt at organisational consolidation.

A Crisis that is Deteriorating as it Drags On

The Geneva, Cairo, and Paris meetings that took place over two weeks indicate the size of the national, Arab, and international efforts that the crisis requires. One cannot say that these efforts were futile. The Russians apparently have begun to accept that political change must happen in Syria, which reflects the degree of regional and international pressure they face as well as that they finally gave up on commending regime reforms and the policy of calling the regime to make reforms. The Friends of Syria conference revealed increasing support for the opposition, and a national consensus on the two major documents was finally reached.

Is this enough to conclude that the crisis is being resolved? Certainly not. Three developments occurred since the beginning of June 2012 that clearly show that it is worsening, not ending:

First, the inability of the UN envoy Kofi Annan to apply any of the six points he proposed as a method to resolve the crisis. Furthermore, the United Nations in effect has halted the international monitoring mission sent to Syria.

Second, violence has reached record levels since the start of the revolution. Regime forces appear to be racing against time to impose their control over the whole country, causing many civilian deaths in rebel areas. Meanwhile, the performance of the Free Syrian Army has improved in terms of artillery, the number of dissident officers and soldiers in the ranks, and civilian volunteers.

Third, the widening gap between the regime and the powers that support it (Iran and Russia) on one side and the portion of the people that are against the regime, the opposition, and Arab, regional and western countries that back the Syrian people on the other. While the first party is trying to maintain the regime's backbone by all means and at any cost, the second aims to fully topple the regime. What a few months back was a shade of gray that could make for negotiation has completely vanished in a spiral of escalating violence.

It is not clear whether Russia and China are about to take another quick step toward compliance with Western countries over al-Assad's fate. Even if the Russian position changes, and Moscow accepts his stepping down as part of the transition, there is no guarantee that the latter party and the Alawite circle surrounding him will give up power. There are those at the top of the regime and among the Iranian leadership that his final move is to divide the country and withdraw the regime to an Alawite state. What has become clear now is that Syria is moving towards a long war of attrition. The military

capabilities of both parties will determine its outcome, and no political solution will begin to materialise until the regime and those who stand behind it sense a close defeat.

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