



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Position Paper

# Geneva II Battle: Opposing Agendas

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: Al Jazeera Center for Studies  
Translated into English by: The Afro-Middle East Centre (AMEC)*





**Members of the United Nations Security Council vote on Syria cease-fire April 2012 [AP]**

## Abstract

As soon as the United Nations Secretary General announced the date for Geneva II, the two primary parties to the conflict – the Assad regime and the opposition – began to weigh profits and losses of participating as well as the respective goals they hope to achieve from the conference. While both sides seem to be aware of the importance of the balance of power on the ground as well as the ability to bring facts to the negotiating table, they are also behaving as if the conference is an extension to the conflict rather than a means to its end.

## Introduction

It has been six months since the well-publicized Moscow meeting between US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. The two sides met May 7, 2013 and decided to hold a new international conference to resolve the Syrian crisis. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared the conference date on November 25, 2013 and announced the goal of the conference would be the full implementation of the Geneva accord issued June 30, 2012, starting with the formation of a transitional government given the consent of all participants, including military and security institutions. This paper outlines the respective parties' objectives as well as provides recommendations for a successful conference in light of a number of obstacles and challenges.

## Obstacles to the conference

It is quite possible that after several previous failed attempts, even the commencement date of January 22, 2014 for Geneva II will not occur, particularly in light of major challenges to the meeting.

First, there is yet to be consensus on the invitee list, including those linked directly and indirectly to the regime and the opposition as well as affected regional players such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. In terms of Iran, western countries had required it to accept the terms of Geneva I if it wished to attend, while the opposition placed the condition that Iran must withdraw all its troops and militias from Syria, including its allies Hezbollah and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade mainly consisting of Iraqi Shi'a foreign fighters.

A second, major challenge has been the serious division in the opposition, whether it be division between those inside Syria and those outside, or between secular and Islamic groups, or between moderate and extremist groups, or between groups who reject the conference and those who accept it. Furthermore, finding acceptable and legitimate representatives for the regime is quite challenging.

The most complicated challenge by far is the lack of agreement on the essence of the negotiation process. For the opposition, the goal is ensuring that Geneva I's six items are implemented, while the regime rejects this agenda item and outright refuses to hand power to any other party.

These critical challenges must be overcome before any decisive declaration that the conference will be held on time. At the regional and international levels, there is consensus that the Syrian conflict will not be settled militarily. For superpowers such as the US, a decisive victory on the ground is unacceptable as it would lead to the complete collapse of Syrian state institutions, particularly the military and security apparatus, leaving in their wake chaos and providing a vacuum for extremist Islamist groups to replace Assad's regime.

For the international community and the US, holding Geneva II is the sole opportunity out of the crisis because it would continue the momentum gained following the chemical weapons deal and because it is a political settlement far from any military action. Such a vision is compatible with Russia's vision for Syria as well as resolving the threat from Islamist "extremist" groups as perceived by the US and its allies in the region. Immediately after the announcement of Geneva II's date, Secretary Kerry re-asserted

the importance of expediting the process with the goal of containing extremism and foreign fighters in Syria.

### **Assad regime's Geneva II calculations**

Geneva II is not the regime's ideal resolution to the conflict because the regime has consistently preferred to eradicate the revolution through military means. The regime questions the intent of Geneva I, particularly because it is essentially compelled to cede power under its conditions.

On the other hand, for the regime, attending the conference allows them to simultaneously respond to their allies' pressures as well as cement the image that their vision matches that of the US to "establish a national partnership government with the aim of fighting terrorism in Syria." Damascus had already partially redeemed itself internationally when it accepted the deal to dismantle and hand over chemical weapons, particularly after the deal was solidified through UN Security Council Resolution 2118.

A second objective of the negotiation process for the regime is that it buys itself time to make changes on the ground and attempt to defeat the armed rebellion. Assad alluded to this by saying that military operations against "terrorism" would continue during the Geneva talks. Any positive developments between Iran and the US after the interim nuclear deal reached between the two countries would also be beneficial to the regime, an added incentive to stretch out the negotiation process. Assad called Iranian president Hassan Rouhani after the deal and congratulated him on what he called a "historic achievement."

A third objective the regime seeks is to amplify the opposition's rifts. The regime's insistence on the participation of internal opposition groups, including those loyal or close to the regime, is a calculated move to pit opposition factions against each other and make the conflict appear as though it is between opposition group rather than between the regime and the Syrian people in rebellion against its rulers. The end goal of the regime is to paint the opposition as unable and ineligible to control the armed factions, represent the Syrian people and enforce agreements reached at the conference. The regime seeks to paint itself as the most organised and cohesive group in attendance.

The final but related objective from Geneva II for the regime is to change its perception from a brutal power that should step down and be prosecuted, to a regime that is a key party entitled to share power with others. For the regime, the conference is an

opportunity to pursue the Lebanese formula in which all parties would be required to put the killing, destruction and displacement behind them and move forward without blame.

The regime's expertise in negotiation, politics and behind-the-scenes diplomacy means the Geneva conference could provide it with the opportunity to achieve some of these objectives. However, there are challenges posed by the conference for the regime – if the opposition manages to unite, define its objectives and demands and present itself as an alternative to the regime, it could spell the beginning of the regime's end. Mobilising sufficient international support to force the regime to make concessions toward the formation of a transitional ruling body would work in the opposition's favour.

### **Opposition's Geneva II calculations**

Just as the regime does not view Geneva II as the best option, the opposition does not either, particularly in light of its fragmented and divided state as well as the challenges of defining the opposition. The internal National Coordination Body welcomes participation in Geneva II and views it as an opportunity to gain legitimacy as a party to the Syrian crisis. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, however, seems unable to form a unified position with the armed opposition and Islamic factions under the General Command of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). While the National Coalition's Jarba-Kilo bloc has expressed willingness to attend, the Syrian National Council (which falls within the Coalition) rejects the conference and is supported by the FSA's General Command in this rejection. The Islamic opposition factions (namely the Islamic Front) go so far as to describe attendance as a betrayal to the revolution and its goals. To create another layer of confusion, the Kurdish component has its own calculations.

If the discussion is limited to only the National Coalition, the Geneva II conference simultaneously presents a major challenge and an opportunity. The Coalition has successfully gained status as a key negotiator for the Syrian people both in the Arab and international communities within only a year of its establishment. The UN General Assembly's Resolution No. 262 in 2013, identifies the Coalition as such; however, the regime refuses to recognise the Coalition and instead labels the armed opposition as "terrorist gangs." If the regime sits with members of the Coalition during Geneva II, it would necessarily mean the regime recognises the existence of a political and military opposition that legitimately represents a significant segment of the Syrian people. It would also shatter the regime's claim that it is the only representative of the Syrian people.

Given the international community's will to prevent a decisive military victory on the ground, it appears as though attending Geneva II should be explored by the opposition. In order to reap the benefits of its three years of sacrifice, the opposition must unite and equip itself with expertise, political efficiency and negotiating skills. It also needs to take advantage of Arab support and military pressure from armed factions on the ground. If the Coalition is able to achieve this, it can present its attendance as an achievement to the Syrian people, one which enhances its legitimacy and stance in the face of a regime which accuses it of minimal influence on the ground.

All of these factors do not discount the serious and legitimate concerns of the opposition regarding Geneva II. This is due to the shifts in the existing power balance on the ground, seen in recent military setbacks on the ground as a result of a shrinking arms supply, as well as growing disputes in the opposition's ranks in comparison to the regime's unlimited support from its regional allies. The opposition fears that attending Geneva II could be equated with a US-Russian trap to drag it into an endless negotiation process without a fixed timetable or framework, much less international guarantees of implementation.

Furthermore, the opposition is wary that any settlement would indirectly serve international agendas at the expense of the Syrian people, namely the fight against Islamic forces with which the West is uncomfortable. A number of important military factions could possibly reject negotiation with the regime, weakening the legitimacy of the opposition and casting doubts on its ability to impose its will on the ground in the event of an agreement.

These are some of the challenges the opposition faces, and the reality is that there are others. However, it may not be able to dodge these challenges by simply boycotting Geneva II, which the world would view as the hindrance of a political solution. Because the international community has not stepped in to end the Syrian people's tragedy, some of them may want to explore this alternative means to end their tragedy, even with its dim chances at success. Some of the Syrian people argue that continued fighting without a decisive victory means continued destruction, displacement, suffering of detainees in the prisons of the regime, and abductions, as well as continued suffering in besieged areas such as the Ghouta region of Damascus and Old City of Homs, in which residents are starving but all access to them is cut off by the regime. If the opposition manages to impose mechanisms on the international community to oblige the Syrian regime to meet certain humanitarian demands, Geneva II may provide the people with a glimmer of hope.

## Conference outcomes

Geneva II poses a major challenge to the parties of the Syrian crisis, starting with the decision of attendance or rejection. For each of the parties, the conference is seen as having the possibility of maximising goals or minimising risks. Both the Syrian regime and the opposition see it as a continuation of the conflict and are attempting to mobilise in order to use Geneva II to serve their interests. For the regime, it is an opportunity to return robustly to the international and regional arena by depicting it as a conflict between the Syrian people and elements of terrorism. On the other hand, the opposition aims to influence the atmosphere surrounding the conferences and create international pressure to reach a settlement that will secure genuine change towards freedom and dignity in line with the aspirations of the Syrian people. Between the regime's attempt to survive and the pursuit of the opposition to create change, Geneva II will most likely constitute simply yet another milestone in a conflict that has a long and bloody road ahead.

*Copyright © 2013 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.*