

Position Paper

Consent by force: Strategies to Avoid Failure in Syria

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: **Al Jazeera Center for Studies***

*Translated into English by: **The Afro-Middle East Centre (AMEC)***





United Nations and Arab League special envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi [AP]

Abstract

Geneva II did not bring about any significant humanitarian or political advancement. The Assad regime attended the talks under pressure from Russia and in order to avoid being labelled as the party refusing a peaceful solution. The regime's unwillingness to negotiate during the talks was unprecedented because it perceived that both regional and military contexts were more favourable to it than they had been prior to the Geneva invitation. However, the perception that things are in the regime's favour is a mirage. The catastrophic humanitarian situation is threatening the international mood, especially given that Geneva II has thus far been an exercise in absurdity. Another American announcement to supply light-calibre weapons to the Syrian opposition highlights the possibility of escalation of fighting, forcing the negotiation process forward as the more desirable option.

Introduction

The first two rounds of the Geneva II negotiations between representatives of the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition ended indecisively. Lakhdar Brahimi, Russia and the US managed to bring the delegations into one room and compelled the regime's delegation to agree on Geneva I as the basis for negotiations. However, no substantial progress was achieved towards humanitarian and political goals, such as lifting the siege on stricken areas or opening humanitarian corridors and formation of a transitional

government. This paper identifies reasons for failure of the Geneva II peace talks, addresses issues that constitute the core of the dispute between the parties to the crisis and examines the prospects of an international political solution to the crisis.

Background: Road to Geneva II

It is difficult to understand anything about Geneva II without at least a brief discussion of the events which led to its commencement. The Geneva I agreement was reached June 30, 2012, stipulating the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive power to stop the war and establish a democratic political system. On May 7, 2013, nearly an entire year later, US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, announced from Moscow their agreement to hold a new international conference based on Geneva I's stipulations. However, the conference, now known as Geneva II, faced several obstacles and was delayed more than once. At the centre of the controversy were the fate of Bashar Al-Assad and choices for representatives of the divided opposition at Geneva II,⁽¹⁾ with both parties wavering until the last possible moment. The first round of Geneva II did not commence until January 22, 2014.

Reasons for failure: sponsorship game

Iran's absence at the Geneva II conference, the result of a withdrawn invitation by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, generated large controversy that almost led to the conference's cancellation. Both the Syrian opposition and Washington and Paris refused Iran's participation unless it committed to the Geneva I declaration, something the Iranian government saw as an unacceptable precondition.

In terms of allies, Iran is even more important to the Assad regime than Russia. While Russia lends diplomatic and political support for the regime in the international community, Iran's role is directly impacting the ongoing conflict on the ground. Iran's militias based in Iraq and Lebanon have consistently been sent by Iran to fight alongside the pro-regime Syrian army. Iran has deployed its consultants for tactical expertise in Syria in addition to providing material and weapons support to the regime to prevent its fall. This makes Iran a foremost player in the Syrian conflict and the party with the most influence over the regime. Iran's absence, then, was the first sign of failure – a resolution to the Syrian conflict cannot be achieved without a regional political will developed on the basis of an agreement between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar topped off with a joint US-Russian nod of approval.

A second key reason can be described as “dialogue of the deaf” – as soon as the conference’s opening ceremony concluded, Russian officials Gennady Gatilov and Mikhail Bogdanov left for Moscow with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, removing pressure from the Assad regime to take the negotiations seriously.⁽²⁾ The two sides were then left to negotiate under the supervision of only the UN and Arab League Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi.

Finally, while the US bluntly and publicly condemned the Syrian regime, leaks of a secret meeting between the US, Russia and Iran on Syria in Bern served to feed the Syrian opposition’s notions that they were excluded from the more serious negotiations processes.

The Geneva II talks did not produce any noteworthy progress, causing the regime to operate under the perception that the situation is in its favour; however, there is some self-delusion in such a view. During both rounds of talks, the regime did not manage to sell its “fight against terrorism” narrative as an excuse for its actions, especially given the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Syria and its continuous barrel bomb strikes on cities and residential areas even as the talks were being held in Geneva.⁽³⁾

With no political solution on the horizon, the dismissal of a military solution in favour of the opposition may prove to be a tactical error on the part of the Assad regime. The US’ most recent announcement to supply light-calibre weapons to the Syrian opposition is just one indication of a possible escalation on the ground sponsored by outside actors.⁽⁴⁾

Military and political disputes at the core

This section of the paper discusses the military and political disputes and developments which comprise the conflict’s core. Both of these aspects have played a real role in not only delaying Geneva II but also preventing the conference from bearing any true solutions for Syria, political or otherwise.

Early 2013, the balance of forces on the ground tilted in favour of opposition forces when they captured Ar-Raqqah in March. It was the first provincial capital which spun out of the regime’s control – something the regime had desperately tried to avoid so as not to be forced to deplete its military capabilities in vast rural areas. The regime also lost much of Eastern Ghouta, southern neighbourhoods of Damascus and parts of the

countryside near the cities of Daareya and Moadamieh, posing a real threat to the capital. Thus, when the US and Russia suggested a conference in May 2013, the regime was not interested in attending given its weakened position on the ground.

This changed when Iran publicly responded to the Geneva II proposal by declaring it would not allow the regime to fall.⁽⁵⁾ Hezbollah, a good friend of Iran's, sent hundreds of its fighters to regain vital areas of Homs, particularly the city of Al-Qusayr. Sectarian militias from Iraq, also associated with Iran and including the "Abu El-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade," assisted regime forces in making serious breakthroughs in the Damascus and Idlib countryside as well as capturing the strategic towns of Khanasser and Qara and re-opening the Damascus-Homs highway.

Another key military dispute was between the opposition factions on the ground – progress by the opposition was dealt a blow when extremist tendencies began to emerge due to a lack of material support from the US and other actors. The appearance of the Al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria in April 2013 was a key reason behind the commencement of Geneva II. ISIL has forced out other opposition forces, including Salafi ones, from liberated areas, feeding into the Assad regime's narrative of fighting "terrorism and takfiri ⁽⁶⁾ armed groups."

As the regime made advancements on the ground, the regional political landscape also began to change. The Syrian crisis began to take its toll on Turkish security, with bombings in the border-town Reyhanli in May 2013 and ISIL attacks on the Turkish border which drew a Turkish military airstrike on an ISIL convoy earlier this year.⁽⁷⁾

Iran's newfound friendliness with the US pushed Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to call for a council bringing together his government with Iran to cooperate "in a constructive way" against terrorism.⁽⁸⁾ The Syrian regime hoped this newfound cooperation would further translate into a change in Ankara's severe stance against Damascus.⁽⁹⁾

The Iran-US rapprochement process also impacted the US' stance against Assad – it served to push Obama to work towards a relationship of understanding with Iran rather than working to overthrow Assad, a move that would weaken Iran. The US wants to contain the influence of Jihadist movements in Syria, going so far as to arm the Iraqi government with Apache assault helicopters in order to assist in the elimination of ISIL in Iraq.⁽¹⁰⁾

Egypt's coup and a military junta in Cairo which was far less sympathetic towards the Syrian revolution than ousted president Mohamed Morsi also had an impact on the political climate in the region. Some went so far as to theorize that Assad was the biggest winner of the Egyptian military's takeover in July 2013.(11)

Thus, when Geneva II convened the morning of January 22, 2014, the landscape was quite dismal: Iran was absent from the conference, there was weak engagement by sponsors on both sides and serious shifts on the ground as well as regionally, all factors contributing to the eventual failure of the first and second round of talks.(12)

Scope of negotiations

Each actor involved in Syria would like to contain repercussions should settlement between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition fail. Iran wants to use an agreement on Syria as a segue into wider settlements. Moscow wants to maintain gains it made during the course of the crisis, particularly its increased ability to rival the US for the first time since the end of the Cold War. The US wants continued influence over choosing members of the transitional governing body and the military council and the implementation of Geneva I.(13)

Given this, a number of factors will force the continuation of the negotiation process which began with Geneva II. There is new international eagerness to resolve the Syrian crisis coupled with an acknowledgement that failure of a political solution will only lead to further turmoil, the rise of more radical movements and the exacerbation of sectarian polarization in the region.

Internally speaking, Bashar Al-Assad's term of office is set to expire July 17 of this year, something Russia may see as an opportunity to cooperate with the US and possibly Iran to implement a transitional government as they see fit. There are two levels to any solution proposed by Russia in this regard: first, to extend the opposition's representation, giving more strength to their allies and moving them away from depending on the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces; and second, to find figures, particularly from the military, which can be a part of the transitional authority stipulated by Geneva I.

With the US hoping to continue to have influence over the selection of these figures and Iran's ambitions for continued relations with the US, Iran's seemingly inflexible position

on the Syrian regime may be moving towards less rigidity in exchange for the approval of the US. Not only did Iran convince the Assad regime to abandon its chemical weapons, its foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made public comments about the necessity of all foreign troops to withdraw from Syria, including Hezbollah.(14)

To conclude, failure of the initial rounds of Geneva II indicates a need for all parties to reassess and determine how committed they are to finding a solution that limits negative implications on their interests in the region.

Copyright © 2014 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

Endnotes:

- (1) *Russia Today*, "Moscow, Washington agree on holding international conference on Syria this month," *Russia Today*, 7 May 2013, <http://arabic.rt.com/news/614994/>
- (2) Ibrahim Hamidi, "Western countries resort to Moscow to pressure Syria: Separating between humanitarian assistance and ceasefire," *Al-Hayat*, 30 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/597931>
- (3) *UPI*, "Official Syrian delegation offers statement on counter-terrorism, opposition coalition rejects it," *Al-Hayat*, 30 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/598155>
- (4) Mark Hosenbal, "Congress secretly approves U.S. weapons flow to 'moderate' Syrian rebels," *Reuters*, 27 January 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/27/us-usa-syria-rebels-idUSBREA0Q1S320140127>
- (5) Saud Az-Zahid, "Look: Iranian religious cleric describes Syria as the 35th Iranian governorate," *Al-Arabiya*, 15 February 2013, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/15/266468.html>
- (6) *Takfiri* is an Arabic term used for those who denounce others as infidels.
- (7) *UPI*, "Turkish airstrike on Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant convoy in northern Syria," *Al-Hayat*, 29 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/597947>
- (8) Mohamed Salih Sidqayan, "Erdogan wants 'joint government' and Khamenei stresses on 'investing great efforts,'" *Al-Hayat*, 30 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/598024>
- (9) *Fars News*, "Did Erdogan ask Iranian leadership to mediate with Al Assad?" *Fars News Agency*, 1 February 2014, <http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9211110184>
- (10) *Reuters*, "U.S. moves forward with attack helicopter sale to Iraq," *Al-Hayat*, 27 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/597309>
- (11) Amal Shehadah, "Israel and Assad biggest winners from Egyptian situation," *Al-Hayat*, 14 July 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/532267>
- (12) No date has been set for a third round of talks at the time of the publication of this paper.
- (13) Ibrahim Hamidi, "Syrian suggestion supported by Russia: Presidential election with international monitoring within three months," *Al-Hayat*, 20 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/594656>
- (14) Raghdah Dirgham, "Zarif calls for foreign fighter withdrawal from Syria," *Al-Hayat*, 25 January 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/596254>