



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Report

Geneva II Middle East Peace Conference

*Dr. Ghassan Shabaneh **

4 December 2013





The Geneva talks have been fraught with obstacles and have failed to garner support of warring parties [AFP]

Abstract

The Syrian tragedy has been described by many diplomats as the biggest threat to international peace and security. It caused the death of more than 100,000 people, has the potential of spreading to neighboring countries, and it forced millions of people to flee their homes. The proposed international conference to solve the crisis, Geneva II, lacks the mechanism and the will of stakeholders to put an end to the Syrian disaster. The Syrian problem exposed the weakness of the international system to deal effectively with war zones, and demonstrated the limitations of the United States in shaping global events. The United States has blinked and paved the way for others to challenge its authority and credibility in the Middle East.

Introduction

The Syrian debacle for the last 31 months has brought to the forefront several questions about the United Nations (UN) and the international community's ability to deal effectively with war zones and their capability to act in a collective security mode rather than a balance of power one. In addition, it raises the questions of whether a new world order is emerging and the extent to which the United States will continue to shape events in the Middle East as it has for the last five decades. The inability of the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) to use their leverage successfully to change the calculations of many actors on the ground in Syria compelled many analysts and observers to inquire about the West's commitment and ability to convene a

peace conference (Geneva II) to end the suffering of the Syrian people, as was agreed upon by the United Nations Security Council when it endorsed the Annan peace plan. (1) American credibility and prestige are on the line in the Syrian conflict. Many are watching how the Geneva II peace conference will unfold. If the USA, supported by a few European countries and most of the Arab states, ushers in a transition to democracy and a smooth transfer of power, America will signal its trustworthiness and its ability to project power at will in order to accomplish the desired outcome. But if the USA blinks again, as it did in drawing its ambiguous red lines, it will be the end of Pax-Americana in the Middle East and Russia's presence, who are already highly visible in the region, will only increase if the USA does not put forth a stronger solution for Syria. The Middle East will become like Eastern Europe during the Cold War: a Russian sphere of influence.

The United States, the European Union and the Syrian Crisis

The reaction of the Americans, some Europeans, and many in the international community to the upsurge of violence in Syria has been timid, detached, and reticent. It took the UN, the Arab League, and the Friends of Syria Coalition (FSC) almost one year to appoint an envoy to Syria and to consider the Syrian crisis a threat to global peace. (2) The first noteworthy statement by a Western official was that of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, declaring "From our perspective Assad lost legitimacy, he has failed to deliver on promises he has made, he has sought and accepted aid from the Iranians as to how to repress his own people." (3)

The world's reluctance to take a firm stand against the regime in Damascus explains the current political, economic, and social deterioration on the ground. The human, social and economic cost of the conflict is irreparable, and most of the damage caused by the conflict could have been averted had the main external actors agreed on a common course of action and settled early on for a peaceful transfer of power. (4) The West resorted to closing embassies, imposing loose sanctions on certain individuals without firm mechanisms of verification, and public condemnations in the media. The Russians, on the other hand, sent arms, supplied oil and cash, protected their ally at the UN, sent their ships and destroyers to the Mediterranean, and used every opportunity to define the opposition as radical Islamists who pose a threat to all Western civilization and interest.

As the talks of Geneva II near, many stakeholders are perplexed about the agenda, the goals, the purpose, the participants, and the willingness of Western powers, led by the USA, France, and the United Kingdom, to use their influence to support the Syrian people in their demands for a peaceful transfer of power and a true transition to

democracy. The success or the failure of Geneva II depends solely on the USA, some regional countries, and a few members of the EU. The conflict in the former Yugoslav republic should serve as a teaching experience to the Americans and Europeans. Only when they acted as a united front were they able to bring the opposing parties to Dayton, Ohio in 1995 to sign the Dayton Accords that settled the conflict in former Yugoslavia. If the U.S. and the EU put their weight behind the process, they will reach a workable solution that will stop the bloodshed in Syria and usher in a new era of peace and stability. But if they continue to use rhetoric over deeds, and continue to contradict one another over arming the moderates, or playing the opposition, or sending mixed signals to the regime, Iran and the Russian Federation will fill the vacuum of power, control the outcome of Geneva II, and formulate the agenda for years to come in the Middle East and North Africa.

The United States and Geneva II

The fundamental problem of Geneva II is the failure of the USA, some Western and a few regional powers to lend effective support to the Syrian people in their struggle for democracy. All the aforementioned countries have to buttress the Syrian National Council (SNC) and other forces on the ground in order to tip the balance of power and facilitate a solution. The USA is in dire need of clear guidelines for Geneva II in order to stop the avalanche of criticism it has endured since the Ghouta chemical massacre of 21 August, 2013. The USA must use its influence to prevent the Geneva II meeting from turning into a social gathering rather than a vital political process that will lead to a transfer of power and implement the Annan six-point peace plan, as agreed upon by the United Nations Security Council. (5) The Russians and Iranians are coming with a clear agenda: protect their ally at all expense, delay any transfer of power, sabotage the process by insisting on the participation of an opposition that is loyal to Assad, continue to send arms and cash to the regime, insist that the solution is an internal Syrian question, and delegitimize the real opposition. The Americans and Europeans have no clear agenda, especially after they have legitimized the regime by signing the chemical weapons agreement with it. Thus many fear the Geneva II peace conference will further legitimize and rehabilitate the regime to enable it implement the Chemical Weapons Agreement. (6)

Therefore, signing the agreement granted the regime in Syria at least a year until items are destroyed and accounted for, at the expense of the Syrian people and Geneva II. The understanding gives the regime ample time to demonstrate its ability to honor commitments and abide by agreements. Moreover, signing the agreement enhanced the arguments of the skeptics about the day after. Many in the West have been reluctant

about supporting the opposition fearing what will happen the day after the regime falls. Cynics have doubted the ability of the opposition to control state institutions and manage state affairs. They began floating the Iraqi scenario of de-Baathification and its implications on state institutions and the sustainability of services on the day after. In addition, they raised the question of dissolving the army and other state bureaucracies as a result of any intervention. (7)

This fallacies of assumptions about the opposition have had a paradoxical effect: they have emboldened the regime and allowed it to bring foreign forces from Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran under the watchful eyes of the world to prevent the regime's demise. Moreover, it encouraged the regime to deploy many internationally prohibited arms against civilians. Furthermore, the regime has utilized these assumptions to rehabilitate its image and presented itself as indispensable in any future agreement. This has had a negative impact on Geneva II, delayed its schedule, and complicated its results.

Pessimists in the West went further in dehumanizing and ridiculing the opposition and the revolution. They defined the Syrian revolution as a sectarian, tribal, and communal conflict rather than a popular movement to remove a tyrant from office. (8) Therefore, the West stood silent in watching massacres, human rights abuses, the exodus of millions of refugees and displaced persons, the use of chemical weapons, and the violation of international humanitarian law.

The Syrian catastrophe demonstrates the lack of determination and desire of certain Western countries to not learn from the past. For instance, British foreign minister George Robertson declared during the Kosovo crisis that "the world has learned its lessons from Bosnia. The international community now knows that it must be united, firm and determined from the earliest possible moments in dealing with the Balkans." (9) The Syrian debacle is in its third year and many Syrian civilians are waiting for a united, firm, and determined international community.

The question remains, why did the international community leave Syria to deteriorate and disintegrate? Had the international community intervened earlier as Robertson suggested, it would have prevented the conflict from spreading to neighboring countries, and it would have tamped sectarianism from spreading in the region. (10) Sectarianism in Syria spoiled the wells for many years to come, hardened and radicalized the positions of all sides, increased the fear and insecurities among all concerned and relevant parties, and made the conditions for holding a peace conference, Geneva II, to end the struggle much harder. These complexities on the Syrian front allowed for countries like Russia

and Iran to regain much of their lost prestige and credibility in the region for years to come.

The Russian Federation and Geneva II

The Russian reaction to the Arab Spring in general and to the Syrian catastrophe in particular has been influenced by internal and external factors. Domestically, Russia has perceived the Syrian debacle as another Islamist takeover that will affect its Muslim population. It feared that the more than twenty million Muslims inside the Russian federation will seek support from their Syrian brethren. Therefore, the Russians stood against the aspiration of the Syrian people and blocked any attempt by them to remove Assad at the United Nations and distanced themselves from many of the Arab League's resolutions that called for his downfall. The Russian government went further than that by accusing some Chechens of fighting alongside the Syrian people. (11)

Internationally, Russia could not accept or fathom the policy of regime change by the USA and others in the Middle East. Russia's position was anchored by a sense of vulnerability within Russia's elite due to domestic political unrest in Russia, which started at the end of 2011. The regime in Moscow has many political and socioeconomic challenges that warrant an intervention by many had Russia not been a regional power or a permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) member: assassinations of journalists, kidnapping of opponents, detention of activists, street demonstrations, violation of international humanitarian law in Chechnya and the invasion of Georgia. Thus, the Russians have been extremely sensitive to setting precedents of intervention over such matters. This Russian insecurity explains, but does not justify, using the vetoes over the Syrian conflict so many times. Since the Syrian conflict began, Russia has made a mockery of the UN and chastised any who supported the Syrian people over their regime at any international forum.

Therefore, Russia will attend Geneva II with two clear convictions: to support the regime and prevent its demise over any other solution, and to prevent any possible military intervention to force any drastic change in Syria. In Geneva II, the Russians might not insist on Assad, but they will persist in keeping the regime intact. Their argument will be that Assad is dispensable, but his secular regime is not. By floating such ideas at Geneva II, the Russians will agree to a cosmetic change in Syria--sacrifice the head of the regime, but keep the main power brokers unscathed.

At Geneva II, Russia is not only worried about the regime in Syria, but also about Iran. Russian- Iranian relations are more economically and strategically vital than Russian-

Syrian ones. Russia needs Iran as a Caspian Sea state. Both have many joint interests in building a navy, settling many legal disputes, and opposing the construction of oil and gas pipelines on the seabed. In addition, Iran is Russia's main arms and nuclear power customer. Finally, both share a common goal in preventing Sunni Islam from spreading. Russia has been fighting Sunni Muslims in the South Caucasus for the last two decades. Thus Geneva II for Russia is about two important alliances, with Syria and the Iran. Russia will work hard not to upset the Iranian one by securing the survival of the Syrian one. The Russian tenets through all of this have been that loyalty and stubbornness pay out.

Conclusion

The world has been watching with both apathy and silence the unfolding tragic events in Syria. The Syrian catastrophe demonstrates the fragility of the international system and the lack of commitment of major powers to any workable solution in Syria. Geneva II is the beginning of the process. It must be used effectively to produce a real solution rather than promises, and any agreements by the conference must be supported fully by the international community. For Geneva II to succeed, clear deadlines must be set, obvious mechanisms have to be established, and strong commitments by the sponsoring countries have to be given. All the agreed upon resolutions at the Geneva II conference must be transferred for vote at the UNSC under chapter VII to ensure their implementation.

Many regional allies are waiting for the USA to take the lead on this and produce the best possible outcome for the Syrian people and the region. The USA has alienated many in the region by its policies of benign neglect and lost a great deal of credibility and prestige since the beginning of the crisis. The Geneva II conference should not be an opportunity to draw another red line, but an occasion to fulfill promises and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the international system.

* *Ghassan Shabaneh is an Associate Professor of Middle East and International Studies at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City.*

Endnotes

1. C. Lynch (2012) Syrian peace plan: U.N. Security Council endorses Kofi Annan's proposal. *The Washington Post*, March 21. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-21/world/35447100_1_syrian-peace-plan-political-transition-syrian-government
2. P. Maigua (2013) UN Envoy: Syrian crisis a big threat to world peace and security. *United Nations Radio*, August 23. <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2013/08/un-envoy-syrian-crisis-a-big-threat-to-world-peace-and-security/>
3. M. Lee (2011) Syrian President Bashar Assad Has 'Lost Legitimacy,' Says Secretary Of State Hillary Clinton. *Huffington Post*. July 7, 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/12/syria-president-bashar-assad-lost-legitimacy_n_895354.html

4. J. Holland (2013) *Pundits Say Syrian "Intervention" Won't End Well, Push for War Anyway*. Moyer and Company. August 26. <http://billmoyers.com/2013/08/26/pundits-say-syrian-intervention-wont-end-well-push-for-war-anyway/>
5. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc11135.doc.htm>
6. O. Al Sharif (2013) *The Reinvention of the Assad Regime*. ArabNews.com, October 9. <http://www.arabnews.com/news/467174>
7. A. Gearan (2012) *Obama Fears Post Assad Syria Will Mirror Iraq*. The Sunday Morning Herald. July, 30. <http://www.smh.com.au/world/obama-fears-postassad-syria-will-mirror-iraq-20120729-236ey.html>
8. E.S. Hurd (2013) *Stop Trying to Make Syria's War into a Sectarian Conflict*. The Atlantic Journal, March 15. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/stop-trying-to-make-syrias-war-into-a-sectarian-conflict/274060/>
9. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmaff/28/2810.htm>
10. M. Ignatieff (2013) *Bosnia and Syria: Intervention Then and Now*. Boston Review of Books, August 15. <http://thebrowser.com/link/bosnia-and-syria-intervention-then-and-now>
11. A. Cullison (2013) *Meet the Rebel Commander in Syria that Assad, Russia, and the USA all Fear*. The Wall Street Journal November 19, 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303309504579181962177007316>

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