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Geneva Conference II: Challenges Faced in Syria and the Region

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Geneva II Conference: Challenges Faced in Syria and the Region

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Introduction

Both sides to the conflict in Syria were invited by the UN to attend the Geneva II Conference on Syria, alongside the countries implicated in the crisis. The conference, a recommendation of Geneva I, was delayed for months following disagreements over the future of President al-Assad and the manner in which the opposition would be represented. So far, the results of its two rounds (January 24-31 and February 10-15, 2014) have failed to produce any significant results. Within this context, this paper examines the political efforts to solve the Syrian crisis to date, and assesses the chances of success for this latest attempt represented by Geneva II. It also explores the motives behind each party's participation in the conference.

Previous Arab and International Initiatives

From the outset of the crisis, allies of the Syrian regime tried to mediate by urging rapid reforms.¹ There was, however, no outside initiative for a solution until the Arab League's Secretary General, Nabil al-Arabi, visited Damascus for a second time on September 10, 2011, proposing the first Arab initiative as an integrated plan for a transition to a pluralistic democracy.² Although the regime did not respond to its efforts, the Arab League put forward a new proposal based on the same initiative on November 2, 2011, a solution based on dialogue between the regime and the opposition under Arab League oversight within a specific timeline.³ The Syrian regime formally accepted this plan, but failed to adhere to its implementation. This took place following a number of meetings with the

¹ In this context come the efforts exerted by Qatar and Turkey during the early months of the crisis. These came to naught due to the Syrian regime's refusal to offer any concessions that might be taken as sign of weakness, particularly given that Egypt, Tunisia, and other examples were fresh in their mind.

² Nabil al-Arabi's first visit was on July 13, 2011. See: "President Assad discusses developments in the region, unifying efforts and strengthening action to solve Arab issues with the Arab League Secretary-general," *Al-Thawra*, July 14, 2011, <http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/archive.asp?FileName=29996479120110714022348>.

³ For details on the Arab initiative see Azmi Bishara, *Syria: A Way of Suffering to Freedom: An Attempt in Current History* (in Arabic), Beirut/Doha: ACRPS, 2013, pp. 446-50.

Arab Foreign Ministerial Committee during which the regime tried to stall the plan.⁴ The opposition similarly showed little enthusiasm for it.

After the Arab observer mission at the end of December 2011 failed to prepare the ground for launching a political process in Syria, on January 22, 2012 the Arab League proposed its second initiative, which stipulated that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should transfer his powers to his deputy. This was rejected outright by the Syrian regime, and resulted in the Arab League's decision to hand its initiative over to the Security Council to enforce its decision.⁵ Russia and China, however, used their veto to prevent a resolution.

On February 23, 2012, UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon and Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-Arabi announced the appointment of former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan as joint special envoy to solve the Syrian crisis.⁶ A six-point plan was put forward on March 16, 2012 that focused on earlier proposals by the Arab League, stipulating an end to all forms of armed violence under UN monitoring prior to the launch of the political process.⁷ With the failure of this initiative, the Security Council sent a UN observer mission to Syria to oversee a ceasefire on both sides on April 14, 2012.⁸ Even though the parties to the conflict had agreed to it, the mission failed to complete its task due to escalating

⁴ "The Agreement between Syria and the Committee of Arab Foreign Ministers over the working plan," *Al-Thawra*, November 3, 2011, <http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/archive.asp?FileName=96045087820111103024320>. The initiative came on the heels of stiff US and EU sanctions against the regime, such as a ban on the purchase of Syrian oil and the withdrawal of their ambassadors from Damascus in addition to increasing Arab pressure on the regime to stop violence.

⁵ "Syria rejects the decisions of the Arab Foreign Ministerial Committee outside the framework of the Arab working plan and protocol," *Al-Thawra*, January 23, 2012, <http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/archive.asp?FileName=44871184620120123034325>.

⁶ "Timeline of UN efforts in Syria," *Al-Jazeera Net*, July 15, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/42aad4cd-532d-4f58-a741-285cfbeb2ce2>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mahmoud Hamdi Abu al-Qasim, "The Annan plan and the international diplomatic impasse in Syria," *Digital Al-Ahram*, <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/articles.aspx?Serial=949120&eid=1875>.

violence. The mission of international observers was suspended on June 16, 2012.⁹ Consequently, the international working group came to realize that the only way to stop the violence in Syria would be to start a political track. On June 30, 2012, the Geneva agreement was struck, stipulating, “the establishment of a transitional governing body that can establish a neutral environment in which the transition can take place. That means that the transitional governing body would exercise full executive powers. It could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.”¹⁰ Disagreements between Russia and the US over the interpretation of the agreement with regards to the role played by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad prevented its implementation. Kofi Annan resigned from his role on August 2, 2012.¹¹ Former Algerian foreign minister Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed UN-Arab League special envoy to Syria on August 17, 2012, but found himself facing the same impasse.¹² He would have resigned were it not for the Lavrov-Kerry agreement of May 7, 2013, which specified the convening of a new international conference to solve the Syrian crisis on the basis of the Geneva I communiqué. When the time to convene Geneva II arrived, the conflict in Syria had become embedded as a ramifying local political conflict with regional and international dimensions.

⁹ The Syrian regime agreed to the plan on March 27, 2012. See “Annan: A positive Syrian response ... America: An important steps,” *Al-Thawra*, March 28, 2012, <http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/archive.asp?FileName=27367281120120328002151>. The Syrian National Council agreed to the plan at the Friends of Syria conference on March 30, 2012. “The Istanbul Conference backs the Annan Plan and demands a timetable,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, April 1, 2012, <http://goo.gl/t28AUq>.

¹⁰ “The Working Group on Syria holds its first meeting in Geneva,” *UN News Center*, June 30, 2012, <http://www.un.org/arabic/news/story.asp?NewsID=16858>. To read the full text of the Geneva I communiqué in Arabic, see: “The full official text of the Geneva communiqué,” *Al-Mustaqbal*, May 8, 2013, <http://www.almustaqbal.com/storiesv4.aspx?storyid=570019>. In English, see <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

¹¹ “America puts Annan’s resignation down to diplomatic failure on Syria,” (in Arabic) *Reuters*, August 2, 2012, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE8710FC20120802>.

¹² “Appointment of Brahimi as new envoy to Syria,” (in Arabic) *Al-Jazeera Net*, August 17, 2012, <http://aljazeera.net/news/pages/7aec49c5-201b-46e0-95ec-9089f23e7de1>.

Parties to the Conflict and Their Stance on Geneva II

Local parties to the Syrian conflict comprise three main groups: the ruling regime, the opposition, and jihadi-takfiri groups. Under the umbrella of each of these groups are offshoots and factions with positions that are, at times, sharply opposed.

The Syrian Regime

Authoritarian regimes, particularly those with oligarchical characteristics, often feature a high degree of cohesion and tend to keep disagreements that might arise contained within narrow regime circles. This occurs because of an awareness that any disruption to one component of the regime will have an impact on the structure of the regime as a whole. Such cohesion and rigidity tends to increase at times of crisis. The Syrian regime confronted peaceful protests and demonstrations with excessive violence and, once the revolutionaries became armed, it shelled cities with various kinds of ordnance. Even so, the regime held together, with the few internal tremors that did occur remaining insignificant in how they affected the regime's strength. For example, dissent took the form of the defection of some officials to the opposition, most prominently that of former prime minister Riyad Hijab on August 6, 2012. Even the bombing of the National Security Headquarters in Damascus on July 18, 2012 had no effect on the unity and cohesion of the regime, which is one of its strongest points. Two main reasons account for this resilience:

- The exclusion of officials inclined toward political solutions and al-Assad's links to big businessmen directing a broad network of economic interests.¹³ For this the regime formed a single cohesive bloc that ruled by force and violence under the leadership of the Syrian president from the onset. The regime also appeared uninterested in the thoughts and suggestions of others outside its narrow circle, thus preventing the formation of internal wings or trends.
- The sectarian make-up of the Syrian Army: socio-economic factors in rural Syria, the coastal regions in particular, together with the political inclinations of the ruling regime, led to a ballooning Alawite influence in the military. In addition, since the army's first coup in 1949, it has presented a threat to the government due to its involvement in politics. Over time, the regime has worked to structure the military leadership and the central military sectors on a highly loyal sectarian basis to

¹³ Such as vice-president Farouk al-Sharaa, ex-defense minister Ali Habib, and some Baath party figures.

prevent any rebellious movements. This also offers an explanation for the regime's ability to retain its capacity as a military organization despite having used the highest levels of violence to end every form of protest.

Accordingly, the decision to participate at Geneva II came from the center of a cohesive regime where decision making takes place in a narrow circle with absolute authority headed by the president. Therefore, any agreement arising from the conference must guarantee the stability of this security-economic-social alliance and preserve the role of the Syrian president within it. A regime like the Syrian regime is not inclined to accept a compromise solution, nor is it likely to discuss its future. Attending the conference was a nod to its Russian ally and aimed to embarrass the opposition by exposing its inability to impose any security arrangements on the ground. This explains the regime's insistence on an end to violence even though it is the side using the greater amount of violence in the conflict. The opposition would, most likely, not be able to impose its view on the armed factions on the ground in isolation from a political agreement. Additionally, proposals to stop the violence enable a delay in any discussion of the transitional governing body as stipulated in Geneva I since the armed opposition will not accept an end to the fighting before the head of the regime agrees to cede his authority in all capacities.

The Syrian Opposition

Despite lengthy discussions among Syrian opposition bodies over the last few months, the decision to take part at Geneva II was not unanimous for a variety of reasons, primarily:¹⁴

- Disagreement between the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and the Syrian National Council, which forms a major part of the Coalition. The Coordination Committee refused to attend the conference because the UN had

¹⁴ On January 18, 2014, the head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Ahmad Asi Jarba announced the Coalition's General Committee's decision to attend the Geneva II conference. The West, Russia, the Arab League, and Turkey welcomed this decision as it was "the last obstacle" and might have prevented, or delayed, the convening of the conference at its appointed time on January 22 in the Swiss city of Montreux. The Coalition then suspended its participation once again and required Iran's acceptance of Geneva I, and its withdrawal of its fighters and experts from Syria, a condition for attending.

not sent it an official invitation and "limited" the invitation to the Coalition, thereby enabling it to form the opposition delegation. The general secretariat of the National Council voted on January 4, 2014 to boycott the conference and threatened to pull out of the Coalition if the decision to attend was taken. This stance, however, did not resonate since major elements within the National Council, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Damascus Declaration voted in favor of going to Geneva. The National Council's refusal to attend was "formal" and was expressed by its chairman George Sabra in a statement on January 19, 2014 announcing the National Council's withdrawal from the Coalition.¹⁵

- The refusal on the part of some armed factions of the opposition to attend conference during the run up. Islamist factions saw the conference as an attempt to bypass the revolution, and threatened to withdraw recognition of any political body deciding to participate in the conference. One commander in the Islamic Front even threatened those who participated, hinting that they would be placed on the wanted list. This situation served to delay any clear decision on Geneva II until conflict was mitigated during a meeting in Ankara, which coincided with the meeting of the General Committee of the Coalition comprised of the major factions (the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Soldiers of Sham, the Mujahedeen Army and the [FSA] General Command). The meeting ended with the support of some factions, such as the General Command and its associates, while others, including the Islamist factions, did not oppose or kept quiet.
- Disagreements within the Coalition. The decision to attend the conference came after a meeting of the Coalition's general committee which occurred in the absence of 44 members who objected to the leadership's performance and what they called "violations and lack of transparency" in the last elections on January 6, 2013. This meeting resulted in the victory of Ahmad Jarba, a strong proponent of attending Geneva II. In addition, the withdrawal of some members caused a procedural problem since the decision to participate conflicted with the Coalition's constitution, which prohibits negotiations with the regime. Any amendments require the agreement of two-thirds of its members, which was not met at the meeting. A ruling was subsequently passed stating that those who had withdrawn had "resigned," which meant the meeting was convened in the presence of 75 members and the decision to be passed on a simple majority. Fifty-eight voted in favor of attending and 14 voted against.

¹⁵ "The Syrian National Council withdraws from the Coalition," (in Arabic) *Al-Jazeera Net*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/f93e44ce-2f62-40cd-993a-a442d5ac4ab7>.

In its desire to participate in the conference, the opposition wanted prevent the regime and its allies from having the opportunity to use the conference for propaganda or paint the opposition as rejecting a political solution. The opposition is also in need of a political solution to stop the revolution from turning into a protracted armed conflict given its inability to win militarily and the consensus among most international and regional powers for a negotiated solution. Equally, participation in the conference would serve to lessen the humanitarian disaster being experienced by thousands of Syrians facing death, homelessness and starvation.¹⁶ Attending the conference would constitute the “civilian” face of the Syrian revolution, and prevent a political vacuum that might be filled by extremist forces whose rise might push international and regional forces into supporting the continuation of the regime.

Undoubtedly, the lack of consensus, or a minimal level of consensus, weakened the Coalition’s position before Geneva II. It did not, however, block the decision to attend. Most Coalition members who supported participation agreed with those opposed that Geneva II would not help find a quick solution to the Syrian tragedy in line with the principles and aims of the revolution. From another perspective, with the convening of the conference, it became clear that the decision to attend had been worthwhile. The Coalition gained moral and political impetus from its success in keeping Iran at a distance from the conference, and benefited from the embarrassment and diplomatic isolation of the regime’s delegation in the opening session of the conference when faced with the opposition’s democratic discourse.

Jihadist Groups

Jihadist groups in Syria are represented by the al-Nusra Front, officially founded on January 24, 2012 and composed primarily of Syrians.¹⁷ The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was established on April 10, 2013, and its membership is composed of Arab or foreign. On January 3, 2014, once behavior detrimental to the revolution and its aims increased, armed opposition brigades confronted ISIS militarily, and forced it out of many of the areas which it had seized. ISIS, however, reasserted control over the whole of al-Raqqa province and the Manbij, al-Bab, and Jarabulus regions of the Aleppo countryside.

¹⁶ Author telephone interview with Burhan Ghalioun, January 19, 2014.

¹⁷ “Abu Muhammad al-Jolani ... Al-Nusra and the future of Syria,” Interview of the Day programme (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera Net*, December 19, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.net/File/Get/e453ed19-b642-46c6-ba7e-dd997656de02>.

The Front tried to assume the role of mediator in its call for an end to the fighting, but, in fact, sided with the armed opposition brigades in the battle against ISIS.¹⁸

Jihadist groups view Geneva II as a Western conspiracy against the project for an Islamic state in the region. They consider the two sides that are negotiating as “agents of the West,” and are not interested in the outcome of the conference. They have their own ideological calculations that differ to the demands of the Syrian revolution. These groups will present an obstacle in any political process, whatever its form, results, or timing.

Regional and International Stances on Geneva II

Since the initial, peaceful phase of the Syrian revolution, the surrounding regional environment has been clearly divided. The Gulf states and Turkey backed the opposition while Iran backed the regime. In both cases, this support comprised various kinds of political, economic, and military aid, with the difference being the commitment of the regime’s allies to achieving their aims. It seems that the camp backing the regime, including Iran, al-Maliki’s government in Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, was consistent and cohesive, while the bloc backing the Syrian opposition was split. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan adopted policies based on support for the counter-revolutionary forces in the region; in Egypt, they have adopted policies adamantly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, Qatar and Turkey are backing the course of the Arab revolutions, in general, and electoral legitimacy in Egypt, in particular, opposing the military coup that did away with it.

Iran’s objectives for Geneva II conform to those of the Syrian regime in its pursuit to see President al-Assad remain in power as a partner in “fighting terrorism” and the formation of a broad-based government to ensure the absorption of the opposition within the political system. They also want to see al-Assad maintain his absolute power over the security apparatus, the army, and Syria’s foreign and security policy. In contrast, the regional states backing the opposition are keen for the conference to lead not only to the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers over the army and security forces, but also to al-Assad’s exit from the Syrian political scene.

¹⁸ “Al-Nusra welcome the Umma initiative to end the fighting with ISIS,” *Day Press*, January 26, 2014, <http://www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?articleid=158986>.

Israel is closely observing events in Syria, watching the destruction of the Syrian state at the hands of the Syrians themselves with satisfaction. It also takes pleasure in witnessing its opponents pre-occupation with fighting each other. In fact, the continuation of the status quo, the exhaustion of Syrian military capabilities, and subsequent socio-economic disintegration are in Israel's interest. The longer the talks at Geneva II continue, the better for Israel.

Internationally, Russia and the US have joint concerns mostly tied with anxiety over the growing strength of transnational Jihadist movements and their influence on the region and Israel's security. They both agree on the necessity of solving the Syrian question by peaceful means through the implementation of the Geneva I communiqué. The initiative to dispose of Syria's chemical weapons in September 2013 led to increased Russian-US cooperation. However, contention remains with regards to the future of the Syrian president. Washington sees al-Assad's continuation as president as an obstacle to a solution, while Moscow insists that he is useful in the fight against "terrorism" and that his future should be decided by elections.

Assessment and Probable Outcomes

Prior to the Geneva I conference, the Syrian regime controlled the main urban centers throughout the country, while the opposition controlled most of the rural areas aside from those inhabited by "minorities" and rural towns, such as Douma near Damascus, and some districts of Homs and Deir al-Zor. The Geneva I communiqué was not implemented due to an overall imbalance in favor of the regime. The balance of forces, however, changed on the ground in a bid to force the regime to accept the principle of a resolution based on a political transition. Accordingly, the opposition took control of many neighborhoods in Aleppo and al-Raqqa—the first city to fall out of the regime's control. The armed opposition also took control of the Jobar, Qaboun, Barzeh, and Tishrin districts of Damascus, and completed its takeover of Darya, Hatitat al-Turkman, al-Maliha, al-Otaiba, and al-Muaddamiya in the Damascus countryside. In this way, the opposition had taken control of all the strategic positions in the Eastern and Western Ghouta's of Damascus and, thus, had surrounded the capital. Outside support remained limited, however, as a result of the spreading influence of Islamist and Jihadist groups within the Syrian opposition, particularly the al-Nusra Front, which is on the US list of banned international terror groups, as is ISIS.

As a result of growing losses, the regime turned the popular committees, which it designated "National Defense Forces," previously used to suppress demonstrations into forces ancillary to the Syrian Army. In Spring 2013, the regime also started relying on the help of Lebanese Hezbollah. In doing so, it reasserted control over strategic areas, such as al-Qusayr near Homs, al-Safira outside of Aleppo, and the Khalidiya neighborhood of Homs. Around Damascus, the regime halted the opposition's expansion and besieged the areas outside its control. Due to the harsh humanitarian conditions for civilians, the opposition was forced to truces in al-Muaddamiya, al-Barzeh, and al-Qaboun.

At the time of the Geneva II conference, the regime's situation was not desperate enough to go back on its stance on the Geneva I communiqué, which stipulates that Bashar al-Assad must transfer all his powers to a transitional governing body and agree not to stand in the presidential elections. The regime's situation on the ground since mid-2013 seems relatively better than it was in 2012.¹⁹ In light of the current international environment and the complexities of the internal situation, the Syrian opposition and its regional backers did not find any alternative to continuing to press the regime and its allies to accept a road map leading to a political transition that would see the removal of President Bashar al-Assad from power and prevent the disintegration of the state institutions and its security apparatus, which would be restructured at a later time. According to all the indicators, however, this will not happen if the current balance of forces on the ground continues in light of the enormous gap between the two sides. A political solution will definitely require regional and international consensus, which is currently not this situation. This puts Syria before two possibilities:

- Treading water while the security and humanitarian situation worsens as a result of Russia and Iran's insistence on Bashar al-Assad's continuing role during the transitional period, and even his standing in forthcoming elections. This possibility can be detected in the statements of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who hid the country's intentions behind statements that they would not "impose outside agendas on the Syrians," and would allow them "to decide their fate for themselves," though these statements were accompanied by continued Russian military aid to the regime.²⁰ The regime is also still being armed with unconditional

¹⁹ "Syria: Interfax report on Assad wavering about leaving power inaccurate," (in Arabic) *Reuters*, January 19, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE0I03L20140119>.

²⁰ "Sources: Russia stepping up military supplies to Assad," (in Arabic) *Reuters*, January 17, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE0G0B520140117?sp=true>.

support from Iran, which was apparent in the fact that Syrian foreign minister Walid Muallem headed to Moscow on the same jet as his Iranian counterpart Mohammed Javad Zarif as part of the coordination of positions prior to the Geneva II conference. Also clarifying this stance, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi made statements that the chances of stopping the conflict in Syria during the conference were “slim”.²¹

- The US and Russia succeed in overcoming their differences and prepare the conditions to end the Syrian crisis following the growing security threats and geopolitical fallout faced by a worsening crisis. It seems there is a growing awareness of the need for greater joint cooperation between the two sides, on the model of the agreement over Syria’s chemical weapons, to reach common points that could form the framework for a solution acceptable to the regional powers and local Syrian parties. In this context, some players and organizations are trying to provide, or give the impression of providing, some of the requirements to help the success of political efforts toward the desired solution. The second conference of donors was held in Kuwait a few days before the Geneva II conference and pledged 2.4 billion dollars to the Syrian people to fund urgent priorities and alleviate the human suffering caused by the Syrian crisis.²² The US administration has also requested Congress to allocate resources to set up peacekeeping forces for Syria.²³

Conclusion

Despite low expectations, Geneva II represented an “opportunity” to reiterate that the entryway to a solution is a political transition by means of a transitional body with full

²¹ “Iran casts doubt on the chances of Geneva II succeeding in light of its not taking part,” (in Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, January 21, 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/595136>.

²² “2.4 billion dollars for the Syrian people; Al-Abdulla: Kuwait is donating 500 million dollars,” (in Arabic) *Al-Aan*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.alaan.cc/pagedetails.asp?nid=168262&cid=30>.

²³ “The US administration asked Congress to allocate an amount for peacekeeping forces in Syria,” (in Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, January 19, 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/594250>.

authorities, including over the security forces and army as stipulated in the official invitation and UN Security Council Resolution 2118.²⁴

Nevertheless, it cannot be an alternative to the political solution the major powers claim to be calling for, which will not be achieved in isolation from the exertion of real pressure on the regime to display the requisite seriousness to make negotiations succeed. The Syrian opposition cannot carry on with futile negotiations which the regime uses as cover to make advances in its efforts to impose its will on the areas outside of its control by force, siege and starvation.

²⁴ "Al-Hayat publishes the letters of invitation and rules for negotiations at Geneva II: A rapid time frame and advice on restraint in outside communications," (in Arabic) *Al-Hayat*, January 9, 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Details/590819>.