

# Three goals for making the most of Geneva II on Syria

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The Geneva II conference on Syria, first announced by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in September 2013, will finally convene in Switzerland next week. Prospects for an immediate or dramatic breakthrough are decidedly bleak, yet that should not be the bar against which the merits of convening Geneva II should be measured.

Three years into the conflict, the prevailing battlefield reality is essentially one of stalemate between government and rebel forces. The humanitarian situation - the plight of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the predicament of areas starved of basic resources - continues to deteriorate. As the violent polarisation and devastation intensifies, none of the domestic parties have made any move toward the compromises necessary for peace. Key external parties, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, the primary regional backers of each side, remain similarly divided, though they have, in their own ways, widely embraced the idea of a political process and of Geneva II. Unsurprisingly, disagreements are most pronounced in relation to the question of political transition, a core component of the original and much-cited Geneva communiqué of June 2012, and on the role that President Bashar al-Assad will have in any political process.

In this context, Geneva II is criticised in some quarters as a hopeless exercise. At worst, it is considered a distraction, potentially for an extended period of time, during which Assad could gain new political and diplomatic legitimisation and space to operate. Meanwhile, the suffering of Syrians would continue and the opposition's backers would avoid confronting the hard choices entailed in pushing for Assad's removal, not least the hows and whos of assisting the myriad rebel groups.

The criticisms of Geneva II are not without substance, but it remains a conference worth convening and could still be a means of setting in motion important progress. With Western powers acknowledging that there are no good military options and that the regime is not about to collapse or capitulate, the process initiated by Geneva II represents one of the only ways of securing necessary international and, at a later stage, domestic buy-in for meaningful moves toward de-escalation and later peace.

With this in mind, the Geneva II talks, an initial step on a long road rather than a one off meeting, should focus on securing three key objectives:

## **1. Establish a permanent international contact group, including the key regional players**

Under Kerry, the United States and Russia have managed to create a meaningful bilateral dialogue on Syria and a trilateral forum with the United Nations and its Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. Even though strong divisions remain between the US and Russian positions, the dialogue has moved beyond grandstanding to deliver a problem-solving deal on chemical weapons and the convening of Geneva II. The frequency of high-level meetings on Syria in recent months has led to some important narrowing of differences.

However, the regional actors mostly remain entrenched in their own incompatible positions, while playing a significant role in fuelling the conflict, including through their material support for the two sides. The path to de-escalation and ultimately to peaceful transition will almost certainly have to also pass through the buy-in and recalibrated engagement of these actors.

Progress on the US-Russian bilateral track, the outer-ring of external actors, now needs to expand to embrace the inner-ring, the core regional sponsors of the conflict. Geneva II and its immediate follow-up should be the occasion for establishing a permanent international contact group encompassing the key regional parties, most crucially Saudi Arabia and Iran, alongside the UN, US, Russia, and a European presence.

To be clear, this will not be easy; the regional divisions are bitter and often visceral. A broader contact group than the existing UN-US-Russian forum will undoubtedly pose new challenges and create new headaches - ones that the US and Russia may both have issues with - but it is a critical piece of the missing architecture for making real and sustainable progress on Syria. It is quite simply imperative to get Saudi Arabia and Iran in a room talking. While the opposition-supporting Friends of Syria group, and particularly the London 11, have an important role to play, they are of limited utility in advancing solutions between adversaries.

The immediate question is the attendance list for Geneva II. While Saudi Arabia will be attending, the US has blocked Iranian participation despite Tehran's professed willingness to play a role in a political process. This could result in an absurd situation whereby over 30 countries, some of which have very little direct relevance to the conflict, are participating in peace talks while one of the most consequential actors is excluded.

Ensuring that the key international actors are represented at Geneva should be prioritised. The US and Iran are now in an unhelpful public stand-off on the issue with Washington insisting that Tehran sign up to the Geneva I communiqué before it can attend, a position that it is even less likely to now endorse on the back of public US ultimatums. However, substantively the point of disagreement is actually somewhat moot. The idea of political transition - the key Geneva communiqué article in question - is an end goal rather than the starting point of any process and one to which the parties attending Geneva already attach differing interpretations. The facts on the ground leave little choice on this issue. The US and Russia have consistently disagreed on the meaning of the communiqué as it pertains to sequencing and Assad's role. If there were agreements on the transition, it would not have taken 18 months to reconvene Geneva.

Where the US and Russia do now agree is that Geneva II should gather and political progress be pursued without first agreeing on Assad's role - Assad after all is not sending a delegation to Switzerland to negotiate terms of surrender.

There is a way out of this standoff. Were it to attend Geneva II, Iran would be de facto accepting the Geneva I communiqué as that represents the terms of reference for the new meeting. The formal inviting party to Geneva II is UN Secretary General (UNSG) Ban Ki-moon. This is an occasion for Ban to demonstrate leadership rather than hiding behind disagreements between the US and Russia and to issue an invitation

for Iran to attend Geneva. Iran is more likely to respond positively to a letter of invitation from the UNSG than to an ultimatum from the US. A Ban Ki-moon initiative may even offer an elegant solution for Kerry, who, in discussing how to make Geneva II a success in Paris recently, argued that, "it needs all players at the table."

Better, then, to use Geneva as a means of establishing inclusivity - and to put in place a permanent international contact group including key regional parties. Without this broader framework, the ability to close the gaps on a much-needed common pursuit of a political solution - something that is increasingly in the interests of all actors despite their differences - will remain elusive.

## **2. Prioritise urgently needed humanitarian assistance**

Given that Geneva will not produce tangible short-term political results, a focus for the conference should be on securing much-needed humanitarian access and aid flows to the Syrian population, specifically by addressing the implementation of the October 2013 UN Security Council (UNSC) Presidential Statement (PRST). Both government forces and elements of the armed opposition have presented obstacles to provisions reaching the Syrian population. However, most of the emphasis in this respect will be on Syrian government compliance. That, in turn, will be best advanced if Russia and Iran are on board with pushing the Assad government to deliver on the humanitarian front.

With Russia having already agreed to the PRST, this could be a realistic goal. The UNSC's own follow-up mechanism is expected to report that the PRST has not been implemented satisfactorily, and Moscow has recently indicated an increased willingness to press the Syrian regime on humanitarian issues. Likewise, Iran might well be responsive on the humanitarian front, more likely of course if it is at the table.

Critics of this approach suggest that focusing on the humanitarian front will be pitching softballs to the Assad government delegation by drawing the focus and the pressure away from the core political issues, in particular the question of a full transfer of executive authority. Comparisons are made with the chemical weapons deal and how that re-established Assad as the address for getting business done in Syria, cementing international dependence on the regime for delivery. Some argue that the only item on the agenda at Geneva II should be the political question. That would be a mistake.

The facts on the ground and the predispositions of the Geneva attendees make clear that Geneva II will not deliver any immediate political transition - so this argument essentially rejects the potential opportunity to provide the population with urgently-needed assistance for the sake of an unrealistic political goal. The chemical weapons analogy can in fact be turned on its head. There was no better option for addressing the threat than dealing with the Assad government. With Russian backing (and Iran also supportive) and by addressing the issue in isolation from bigger political questions that were and remain stuck, Assad was forced to deliver on an important international ask. The West did not change its meta-narrative on Syria, but transactional diplomacy produced results. At the current juncture, elements of this approach should also be tried with regard to humanitarian access and provision - despite understandable queasiness in some Western circles. Ultimately the idea that it is better not to proceed with this track, even if it can succeed in alleviating suffering, because it grants the regime unwarranted legitimacy is absurd.

The provision of humanitarian aid is an urgent need; it secures something the West actually wants, and it removes from Assad a tool - besieging areas - that he has been using as leverage in the war. From a Western perspective, it is also a way of getting Assad's allies to assume responsibility for his compliance on an issue around which there is international consensus to which they themselves are party. Rather than making the focus something that the West is unable to currently deliver - a sufficiently coherent, credible, and inclusive opposition, able and ready to assume power, it places the delivery challenge at the door of the Assad government and its supporters - either leading to an improved humanitarian aid environment or to fissures

in the pro-Assad camp. If Assad's allies can help guarantee better humanitarian access, this is both good in itself and a sign that it is worth pushing for further deliverables.

### **3. Legitimise the idea of intra-Syrian negotiations**

It is clear that the talks between the domestic actors will not yield quick results, with neither delegation coming to Geneva with a mandate for meaningful negotiations and the Syrian National Coalition (NC) position weakened by its lack of leverage with rebel groups on the ground.

However, initial intra-Syrian talks at Geneva, and their continuation after the formalities of the conference opening, can still serve an important purpose. The talks will legitimise, three years into the conflict and for the first time, the very idea of negotiations between the regime and the opposition. This will have an important impact at some level on both sides.

Assad - who for so long has refused to accept the existence, let alone legitimacy of any meaningful opposition - will be acknowledging and negotiating with the opposition. The regime will, for the first time, have to address issues of political transition, particularly given that its chief political backer, Russia, is sponsoring the Geneva process.

The NC, if it is to survive, will have to start addressing issues of political platform, representation, and responsibility in ways that it has hitherto been able to avoid. An ongoing political process will either demonstrate that the NC is not up to the task, and new opposition alliances will have room to emerge, or it will overcome some of the weaknesses that have blighted its existence to date. Both sides will in some ways be forced to begin the process of articulating a negotiating strategy, with elements of detail and sequencing, including what the contested political transition would look like, to replace the continued trumpeting of unachievable zero-sum ambitions.

Legitimising intra-Syrian talks can also be utilised to advance efforts at local ceasefires on the ground, and this should be a focus for the coming period. Local ceasefire efforts are showing some signs of progress, and the symbolism of Geneva should be rallied to give momentum to such initiatives. Ceasefires will be crucial to advancing both the humanitarian situation and to allowing for experiments in local decentralised power sharing.

Having legitimised the idea of intra-Syrian engagement, the conference sponsors should then aim to make the negotiating forum established at Geneva the location for ongoing talks, empowering a structure for regime-opposition contact, which has not existed to date. While this process will certainly take time to bear fruit, its existence, combined with hoped for humanitarian advances on the ground, could begin the journey toward creating the space for more meaningful advances and de-escalation.

To expect quick success at Geneva would be mistaken. However, there are still significant gains on offer from the conference and, despite the certainty of much mutual recrimination and hostility, all external actors should be committed to avoiding a blow up and breakdown of talks.

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