

## Syria: Par for the Course

Written by Daniel Serwer

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DANIEL SERWER, FEB 2 2014

UN and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi adjourned the so-called Geneva II peace talks on 31 January without any substantial agreement. He is hoping to reconvene the talks on February 10.

While the press has been bemoaning the lack of progress and the prospect of collapse, this session went about as well as could be expected. The homicidal Syrian government is finding itself cornered by a moderate opposition that went to Montreux and then Geneva fragmented politically, weakened on the battlefield and holding a losing diplomatic hand. But the opposition has managed to take advantage of Damascus' unforced errors. The result is not peace. But it is a clear indication of who stands in the way of peace.

The basic problem with Geneva II was congenital. The meeting was born of a joint American/Russian desire to do something. But Moscow and Washington have been unable to agree on precisely what the something is. Washington thinks it is creation of a transitional government formed by mutual consent, which therefore excludes President Bashar al Asad from power. Moscow mouths agreement with the June 2012 "Geneva I" agreement that calls for such a transitional government with full executive powers but denies that this means Asad has to step aside.

Neither Moscow nor Washington has been prepared to yield on this fundamental point. Moscow, while claiming not to be wedded to Bashar al Asad, continues to supply him with vital weapons, financing and diplomatic support. Washington might like to find a compromise. President Obama regards the Syrian conflict as a distraction from his main objective: blocking Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. But the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) that Washington supports and nurtures insists that Bashar al Asad step down, aside or out. So too do the opposition fighters. Even if the SOC were to compromise, the fight would go on.

The Syrian government tried hard in its overly lengthy and aggressive opening statement last week to change the subject. It wants Geneva II to focus on terrorism, by which it means any armed resistance to its brutal attempts to crack down on dissent. Meanwhile, Asad is preparing the way for spring elections in government-controlled areas guaranteed to return him to office. Iran is backing him to the hilt. Excluded from the Geneva II meeting, Iran's President Rouhani took advantage of the annual Davos conclave to project his moderate image. But Tehran continues to provide both Revolutionary Guard Corps advisers and Hizbollah fighters to make up for the Syrian regime's dwindling army and other security forces.

The fractious opposition had a hard time agreeing to go to the Geneva II talks and arrived there without command and control over most of the forces fighting the Asad regime (and each other). But by insisting on the transitional governing body as the subject of the conference, the opposition hit the Syrian regime at its most sensitive point. Damascus is unwilling to negotiate any transition away from Bashar al Asad. That makes it the main obstacle to a political solution and the peace that would presumably ensue.

UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi at one point was meeting separately with the delegations in Geneva. This was interpreted in the press as a setback, because the original plan was for them to meet in the same room but talk separately to Brahimi. But from a diplomatic perspective, meeting separately with Brahimi, a procedure known as "proximity" talks, is preferable. That way he can probe each side out of the hearing of the other on their bottom lines and on what each might be able to offer to save the talks from collapse.

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A one-off prisoner exchange and local ceasefires are the most likely candidates. The intelligence value of prisoners declines rapidly after their capture. Even if their treatment is abysmal, they still need to be guarded and fed. Failing to provide them with minimal sustenance brings the wrath of the international community. So getting rid of prisoners you are holding is a plus in wartime, especially if you can get some of your own people released in exchange, thus alleviating pressure from your own side.

Local ceasefires are far less likely to be successful. Where they have occurred, the Syrian regime often disrupts them with shelling by artillery, rockets and bombs. International monitors are lacking. There is no third party to assign responsibility for breaches or to facilitate communications. Sustained ceasefires are therefore unlikely, though short-term humanitarian windows for delivery of humanitarian supplies or evacuation of vulnerable people may sometimes be possible.

At this stage, the talks cannot achieve much more. The Asad regime thinks it is winning and wants to continue the fight, even if it is unlikely to be able to put all of Syria back under Asad's control. The opposition is battered and weary, but still willing to do battle. It may look like a stalemate to outsiders, but it has not reached the "mutually hurting" stage: "ripeness" requires that both sides have to conclude that they will do better by ending the fight rather than continue it.

When all else fails, an agreement to meet again is trumpeted as success. The important thing is that if talks collapse, or fail to agree anything substantial, they do so in a way that causes little harm and leaves open the possibility of reconvening. Even if reconvened talks lead to prisoner releases and local ceasefires, the fighting will continue, as should the talking. This is par for the course. If peace agreements were easy, we wouldn't have wars.

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### About the author:

**Daniel Serwer** is a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a scholar at the Middle East Institute. He is the author of *Righting the Balance: How You Can Help Protect America* (Potomac, 2013), which focuses on how to strengthen America's civilian foreign policy instruments to match its strong military arm, without breaking the bank. He blogs at [www.peacefare.net](http://www.peacefare.net) and tweets @DanielSerwer