

Gateways to Peace in Syria: Going Beyond Geneva II

Written by Hilal Khashan

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HILAL KHASHAN, FEB 18 2014

Understanding the Syrian Conflict

The road to Geneva II conference received much more international attention than warranted by the meager results of its two rounds of talks. Considering the extreme complexity of the Syrian conflict—and that three years since its inception it continues to rage with no let up in sight—the fact it convened represents an accomplishment in itself. In this piece, the author argues that it would have been presumptuous to expect Geneva II to resolve the conflict in Syria, and restore peace and safety for its war-weary people. Syria is a religiously and ethnically heterogeneous country. Its armed conflict transformed it into an arena of regional and international contestation. There is lack of cohesiveness among its myriad communities on the two sides of the divide. The intertwining of the uprising with the influx of Qaeda-affiliated rebel groups, in the presence of an unyielding regime, has unavoidably prolonged the bloody conflict. Geneva II had the advantage of placing Syria on the long road to peace, whose attainment lies at a different road junction. When a journalist asked Syrian Minister for National Reconciliation Ali Haidar “What is after Geneva II, he said Damascus I.”¹

Time for War

The Syrian regime did not take seriously the Geneva I Communiqué of June 30, 2012 that demanded a comprehensive ceasefire accompanied by the army withdrawal from the cities, and the initiation of the process of forming a transitional government with full executive powers. The communiqué proved unworkable due to the insincerity of the Syrian regime that seemed determined to crush the opposition. Every time Syrian President Bashar Assad “... said he had withdrawn his forces, he subsequently declared that he had recommitted new forces to ‘fight terrorism.’”²

Backed by Russia and Iran, Assad’s regime held its ground and was ultimately able to prevail in the fight against fragmented and ill-equipped rebels. Syria is a fulcrum Middle Eastern state and winning it is a prize for any rising regional power. Iran appreciated the importance of Syria immediately after the success of its Islamic revolution in 1979. In recent years Syria attracted the attention of Russia who sought to rebuild itself as a preeminent world power following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Syria’s strategic location and its demographic mosaic explain—especially when they come into play with U.S. vacillation and disinterest—Moscow and Tehran’s dogged defense of the Syrian regime. The Kremlin has not wavered in covering up for Assad regime’s ruthless and immoral war behavior made it impossible to provide basic humanitarian aid to trapped civilians without intervention by the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov dismissed the Western-Arab draft UN Security Council resolution to allow humanitarian aid into Syria as mischief. He claimed “its whole purpose and aim is to create grounds for future military action against the Syrian government if some demands it includes are not met.”³ Backed by international and regional allies in a big hurry to find their place under the sun, the regime in Damascus aspired to crush the opposition groups into submission ahead of making peace with them.

Playing Pseudo-Diplomacy

When in October 2013 U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov committed

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themselves to convening Geneva II conference, they had no illusions about its results. What mattered for them seemed convincing, if not coercing, the Syrian government and opposition to send delegates to the conference. Geneva's symbolism lay in that it established the unavoidability of negotiations to end the conflict. Having the two sides sit in one room ushered in a process that did not have to make headway from the first encounter. Cognizant of this reality, Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallem came to the conference with a belligerent attitude. He exceeded his 10-minute time limit by about 25 minutes, altercated with Ki-moon, and "called on foreign powers to stop supporting 'terrorism' and lift sanctions against Damascus."⁴ Upon arriving to Geneva Muallem warned the conferees that "the subject of the president and the regime is a redline for us."⁵

The government delegation used the conference as a forum for spin and smear in the name of combatting terrorism. Just one day after suspending the conference, the Syrian regime placed members of the opposition team to Geneva II on its list of terrorists. Member of the government delegation Bashar Jaafari justified the measure on the grounds that "whoever refuses to fight terrorism is part of terrorism."⁶

Well aware that the conference will not achieve a breakthrough in the three-year conflict, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon tried to exert moral pressure on Syria's government and opposition delegations to overcome their deep divisions. He told them it would be "unforgivable not to seize this opportunity to bring an end to the suffering and destruction"⁷ that the war has caused. Thus, when he delivered the opening speech, Ki-moon did not hope to achieve more than easing the siege on war-battered civilians. He recognized that "great challenges lie ahead but they are not insurmountable."⁸

Ending obstinate conflicts requires the willingness of the combatants to settle their differences through negotiation. It presupposes conviction that their cost of continuing the war exceeds the benefits that might accrue to them from it. In view of this, it is an exaggeration to consider Geneva II a failure because it did not end the conflict. From the start delegates aimed at specific "... concessions, not a full peace deal."⁹ Impressions from the first day of the conference suggested that even though the government and opposition delegations could not put aside their acrimony towards each other, they seemed willing "to discuss prisoner swaps, local ceasefires and humanitarian aid."¹⁰

The regime did eventually allow limited food supplies and other relief aid to enter the old sector of Homs, and Yarmuk Palestinian refugee camp. It also allowed the elderly and minors to leave besieged areas only to increase the number of the too many uncared for refugees. Exacerbated by the lack of the UN's forthcomingness in aiding conflict displaced Syrian refugees, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu expected that one day a "... UN secretary general will go to Homs, will go to Yarmuk and will apologize."¹¹ On February 15 Lakhdar Brahimi, the special UN/Arab League envoy to Syria, apologized to the Syrian people for his inability to get the two sides to engage in serious talks to end their "horrible crises."¹² He might as well have apologized right after the opening session on January 22 instead of giving them false hopes about an imminent agreement.

Taking Negotiations Seriously

The resolution of the Syrian conflict lies beyond the capabilities of the country's warring factions, or the diplomatic acumen of Brahimi. The polarizing statements of Kerry and Lavrov in Geneva's opening session demonstrate that the U.S. and Russia have not yet agreed on a vision to guide them in resolving the Syrian dilemma. Whereas Kerry ruled out the possibility that Assad could stay in power, Lavrov emphasized the need for the government and the opposition to reach an agreement without foreign interference, in order to "preserve Syria as a sovereign state... to be a secular state."¹³

Assad's advisor Buthaina Shaaban described the only difference between the government and the opposition as "a major difference."¹⁴ The regime's insistence on putting an end to terrorism as a sine qua non condition on the road to viable peace means that it wants to delay the issue of forming a transitional government for as long as possible. The Iranians will not apply pressure on Assad's regime until after they secure a permanent agreement with the West on their controversial nuclear program. Peace in Syria will remain on hold until Iran settles its differences with the West, and the U.S. curtails its encroachment on Russia's core interests in its near abroad. Decrying the exclusion of Iran from Geneva II, Lavrov noted that negotiations "... are about bringing to one table not those who you like, but those

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upon whom solving the problem depends.”¹⁵ Iran’s absence from Geneva II indicated that goal-aiming talks were not about to be initiated.

The solution is still far off, although Geneva II remains its framework, and it does not matter if the opposition ups its demands, or the regime continues to buy time, seek battle victories and shun meaningful diplomacy. Going to Geneva II was made possible by a package deal in September 2013 between the U.S. and Russia that also involved dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons. The Syrian regime is not oblivious to the coupling of dismantling its chemicals and reaching a political solution to the conflict. Therefore, Damascus has opted to slow down the removal of chemicals from the country. Robert Mikulak, U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), complained that “the effort to remove chemical agent and key precursor from Syria has seriously languished and stalled.”¹⁶ He revealed that “Syria had so far removed just 4% of ‘priority One’ chemicals like sarin from the country, originally scheduled to be completed by Dec. 31 [2013].”¹⁷

The inauspicious end of Geneva II did not seem to surprise U.S. President Barack Obama who, nevertheless, promised to increase the military pressure on the Syrian regime in order to convince it to relax its adamant negotiating position. He did not lose sight, however, of his intention to continue “... to work with all the parties concerned to try to move forward on a diplomatic solution.”¹⁸ U.S. officials believe “negotiations are like mushrooms. They grow best in the dark.”¹⁹ The Syrian regime distorts reality when it thinks having the upper hand over the ragtag rebels can obliterate the opposition. Assad erroneously thinks he can return to the antebellum way of governance. When negotiations between the U.S., Russia and Iran grow best in the dark, as they are eventually bound to, Assad will realize that he is an expendable pawn in the game of nations.

¹ “Syrian Government Ready to Talk to Opposition Leader,” February 12, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFiRDEPJ2tY>

² James Miller, “Syrian Peace Conference Now Certain to Fail,” The Interpreter, January 20, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/syrian-peace-conference-now-certain-to-fail/>

³ Steve Gutterman and Michelle Nichols, “Russia Says Syria Aid Draft Could Open Door to Military Action,” Reuters, February 13, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/13/us-syria-crisis-russia-aid-idUSBREA1C05V20140213>

⁴ Khalid Yacoub and Lesley Wroughton, “Syrian Warring Sides Meet under World’s Gaze,” Reuters, January 21, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/21/us-syria-un-iran-idUSBREA0J01K20140121>

⁵ “Syria Peace Talks Stuck over Assad’s Future,” al-Jazeera, February 22, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/syrian-peace-talks-stuck-over-assad-future-201412218560594671.html>

⁶ “UN: Syrians Must ‘Seize Opportunity’ at Peace Talks,” BBC News, November 25, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25093408>

⁷ “Syria’s Rivals Begin Talks,” Gulf Daily News, January 23, 2014, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=369289>

⁸ “Syria Talks: Humanitarian Issues Top Geneva Agenda,” BBC News, January 22, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25093408>

⁹ Euronews, February 16, 2014, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/02/16/both-sides-at-a-deadlock-as-geneva-peace-talks-on-syria-end/>

¹⁰ “UN Failure in Syria Like Bosnia, Rwanda,” February 2, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Feb-02/246110-un-failure-in-syria-like-bosnia-rwanda-turkey.ashx#axzz2tZkw7Mlx>

¹¹ Gabriela Baczynska and Stephanie Nebehay, “Syrian Enemies may Discuss Prisoner Swaps despite Talks

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Acrimony," Reuters, January 22, 2014, <http://larouchepac.com/node/29564>

¹² "Syrian Peace Talks Reach Impasses," VOA, February, 15, 2013, <http://www.voanews.com/content/syrian-peace-talks-reach-impasse/1851977.html>

¹³ Globe Streets, January 22, 2014, <http://www.globstr.com/node/2075206>

¹⁴ "Syria Peace Talks: Opposing Parties Agree to Use Geneva I Communique to Go Forward after Four-Day Deadlock," ABC News, January 30, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-30/syrian-opposing-parties-agree-on-geneva-i-for-peace-talks/5226716>

¹⁵ "Geneva II Peace Conference on Syria in Jeopardy," LaRouche Pac, January 20, 2014, <http://larouchepac.com/node/29564>

¹⁶ "Syria Misses Chemical Weapons Deadline," Circa, February, 5, 2014, <http://cir.ca/news/syrian-chemical-weapons-disarmament>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard Spencer, "Syria: Barack Obama Threatens to Apply More Pressure on Assad Regime," The Telegraph, February 16, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10640895/Syria-Barack-Obama-threatens-to-apply-more-pressure-on-Assad-regime.html>

¹⁹ Martin Indyk, "Remarks at J-Street Gala," U.S. Department of State, September 30, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/214969.htm>

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Hilal Khashan is a Professor of Political Science at the American University of Beirut. He is the author of five books and 80 articles. His works appeared in periodicals such as the Journal of Conflict Resolution, The British Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Security Dialogue, the Middle East Quarterly, and Third World Quarterly. He is currently working on a book about Hizbullah.