

WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS OF THE PEACE TALKS ON SYRIA?

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The United Nations Peace Conference on Syria is due to take place on 22nd January. The Syrian Government and opposition will meet for the first time since the outbreak of the conflict in March 2011 in the Swiss town of Montreux, after which the conference will move to UN headquarters in Geneva on 24th January. Several factors helped bring about this meeting (such as Iran's new nuclear programme or the agreement on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons), despite the failure of initial attempts.

After the chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of Damascus that caused hundreds of injuries last August, the option of a military intervention gained great weight among Western powers. The UK submitted a resolution to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to authorise "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Syria. Russia objected to such an action, arguing that there was no solid evidence of the use of chemical weapons. The British government motion for a US-led military action was rejected by Parliament. In spite of this refusal, French President François Hollande also called for an "appropriate response" against Damascus. The US finally decided not to follow this path, as the negotiations with Russia to destroy Syrian chemical weapons went on, and opted for diplomatic negotiations to include the members of the Syrian regime.

Nevertheless, there are very few prospects of finding a satisfactory solution to end the conflict. The possible role of President Bashar al-Assad in the transition is the main element of discord. The prerequisites set by both the opposition and the Syrian regime and the disagreement about which actors should take part in the conference, along with the escalating violence in the country and the regional spill-over effects of the conflict, are jeopardising a successful outcome to the negotiations.

From Geneva I to Geneva II

The goal of the so-called Geneva II conference, according to the UN, will be “to achieve a political solution to the conflict through a comprehensive agreement between the Government and the opposition for the full implementation of the Geneva communiqué, adopted after the first international meeting on the issue on 30 June 2012, which called for the creation of a transitional government that would lead to holding elections.”¹

Neither the representatives of the Syrian regime nor the opposition figures took part in the first meeting of the Action Group. Iran and Saudi Arabia were also not invited to join the negotiations. The programme of the Action Group was repeating the six-point peace plan fostered by Kofi Annan, calling for a cessation of violence, full cooperation with all the parties and the UN monitors, access for humanitarian agencies to provide relief, release of detainees, the start of “inclusive political dialogue” and unrestricted access to the country for the international media.

It proposed the formation of a national unity government to launch a Syrian-led political process leading to a transition, but it did not suggest how this could be achieved. This transitional governing body was supposed to be made up by members of the present Government and the “opposition and other” unspecified groups, on the basis of mutual consent. This body was also meant to control all government institutions, including the military forces, security services and intelligence services.

The plan was ignored by the parties. Russia and Iran went on backing the al-Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar continued financing the armed opposition. The bloodshed did not end and Islamic radicals increased their presence on the ground. Neither did the Action Group clarify the role al-Assad was expected to play during the transition. Western powers insisted on the fall of the regime, while Russia and China firmly opposed calling for the president to step down, fearing a foreign intervention. These two countries stated that it

1. “Syria conference to open 22 January in Montreux, UN confirms”, 17/12/2013, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=46760&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UsFfMtKk-So>

was up to the Syrian people to decide who could participate in a new government.

Initial attempts to seek a diplomatic solution failed, but the chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of Damascus last August marked a turning point. Western powers, moved by the need “to do something” and the attempt to restore their credibility against the violation of the “red line” set by Obama,² started to consider a military strike, in spite of recent memories of failed military interventions in the Arab world.

However, the Syrian regime managed to avoid a strike by signing a deal for the destruction of chemical weapons before mid-2014, as announced on 14th September by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.³ In the short term, the deal “gave Washington a reason not to intervene militarily in Syria, while Damascus found protective support in Moscow, which wants to avoid the fall of its only Arab ally”⁴. Russia also considered the foreign intervention in Libya in 2011, which from its point of view “was driven by the parochial interests of both Western powers and their Middle Eastern allies”⁵ and did not contribute to building a stable environment in the region. Moscow condemned this intervention and claimed that it was “deceived”⁶ as Russian diplomats agreed to the establishment of a no-fly zone, but not on a strike to depose Muammar Gaddafi.

The medium-term benefits of the agreement on chemical weapons are more uncertain. According to Marc Pierini, if it means leaving the unpredictable and violent Assad-Maklouf clan in place, pressure from the rebellion will increase and trigger more retaliatory violence by the regime.⁷

2. Levy, D., Barnes-Dacey, J., “Eight things to consider before intervening in Syria”, ECFR, August 2013, http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_eight_things_to_consider_before_intervening_in_syria

3. Gordon, M., “U.S. and Russia reach deal to destroy Syria’s chemical arms”, *The New York Times*, 14/09/2013.

4. Mikail, B., *Can the Syrian war be ended?*, FRIDE, Policy Brief no. 167, November 2013, http://www.fride.org/descarga/PB_167_Can_the_Syrian_war_be_ended.pdf

5. Judah, B., “Syria – Why Russia said no”, ECFR, 07/02/2012, http://ecfr.eu/blog/entry/syria_why_russia_said_no

6. Troitsky, M., “Russia’s Syrian dilemma”, ECFR, 02/03/2012, http://ecfr.eu/blog/entry/russias_syrian_dilemma

7. Pierini, M., “The Syrian War in Three Capitals”, Carnegie Europe, 17/10/2013, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2013/10/17/syrian-war-in-three-capitals/gqjr>

Overlapping Internal Crises

The Syrian regime still controls key locations, including the area of Qalamoun, a mountainous region on the Lebanese border, which is crucial to the opposition in order to guarantee weapons and goods supply from the neighbouring country or the evacuation of refugees. Last June, government forces also restored their power in the strategic area of al-Qusayr, in the province of Homs, seven kilometres from the Lebanese border, after several months of violent clashes.

The support of the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah was crucial to secure their victory and guarantee control on the northern Bekaa Valley, in the neighbouring country. The head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said the intervention of his group was meant to defend Shiites from the rebels (mostly Sunnis), fuelling the sectarian fight. This offensive allowed the Syrian regime to establish a bridge between Damascus and the province of Latakia, whose population is mostly Alawite, like the president.

Last December, the US and UK decided to interrupt non-lethal aid for rebels⁸ in northern Syria, as they were concerned about reports that Islamist groups had stolen material belonging to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). While Western powers faced the dilemma of how to help the moderate Syrian opponents without arming them directly, rebels received weapons from Qatar and Saudi Arabia through Turkey and Jordan. This situation provided al-Assad with justification to use violence against “foreign-backed terrorism.”

Since the first meeting of the Action Group, the conflict has increasingly become internationalised with the involvement of militants from across the Arab world. The overlapping internal crisis in Syria offered fertile ground for jihadist groups. Even if it is impossible to verify the exact number of armed Islamist militants across the country, they are estimated at 10,000-12,000 men.⁹ Al-Qaeda affiliates control many areas of the Aleppo and Idlib governorates in the northwest of the country, which hinders the end of the conflict.

8. “US and UK suspend non-lethal aid for Syrian rebels”, *The Guardian*, 11/12/2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25331241>

9. Spencer, C., Phillips, C., Kinnimont, J., *Western Policy towards Syria: Ten Recommendations*, Chatham House, December 2013.

In the meantime, the UN warns about the worsening of the humanitarian crisis,¹⁰ due to the obstacles to delivering food and medicine to civilians, while the violence is worsening and the cost of living is increasing in a devastated economic context. Since the outbreak of the protests, more than 130,000 people have died,¹¹ according to the latest data of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based activist group. The number of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries totalled 2.4 million at the end of 2013, a number four times bigger than the same period of the previous year. The UN estimates that more than 6.5 million Syrians were internally displaced¹² at the end of December, 46% of them children. According to the UN, 9.3 million people inside the country are in need. At least 200,000 of them, living in areas under the regime control, cannot receive food or medicines on a regular basis. The UNRWA confirmed at least 20 deaths caused by hunger. The situation is not so different in the northern territories in the hands of the jihadists, where violent clashes obstruct the aid supply for at least 50,000 people.

Prerequisites of Geneva II: Starting Off on the Wrong Foot?

Both the Syrian regime and opposition have set a number of prerequisites before sitting at the negotiating table, which may condemn the outcome of the discussions. Among other requests, the opposition calls for free circulation of humanitarian aid and the release of detainees (women and minors); while the regime calls for the opposition to disarm and is unwilling to negotiate with “terrorists”, as it usually defines those who do not support the president.

One of the core questions concerns the participation of government forces in the negotiations and the transition. Rebels are not even willing to discuss a possible involvement of Bashar al-Assad in the post-conflict era, while the regime will not accept any political solution which implies the president’s departure. Levy and Barnes-Dacey assert that “insistence on Assad’s immediate removal may be morally appealing, but this is not a practical plan. Friends and foes will need to be pushed to the negotiating table.”¹³ According

10. Gladstone, R., “Syria crisis is worsening, U.N. Relief official says”, *The New York Times*, 03/12/2013.

11. http://syriahr.com/en/index.php?option=com_news&nid=1312&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.UslfZ_TulrU

12. <http://syria.unocha.org/>

13. Levy, D., Barnes-Dacey, J., “Syria: The imperative of de-escalation”, ECFR, 24/05/13, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/syria_the_imperative_of_de-escalation208

to them, "Assad's fate must be a question for the transition process and not a pre-condition."¹⁴

A second key point lies in the controversial participation of Iran and Saudi Arabia among the 30 countries¹⁵ which will be part of Geneva II. The UN invited Iran to join the talks. Both Russia and the US revealed their support for Tehran's involvement.¹⁶ During his Middle East tour of early January, US Secretary of State John Kerry admitted for the first time that Iran might play a role in the next peace conference and urged Tehran to use its influence on the Syrian regime to stop the rising violence. As a prerequisite requirement to its attendance, Kerry asked Iran to accept that the conference could opt for a possible fall of al-Assad. On the other hand, the Syrian regime objects to the participation of Riyadh (which backs the opposition), while the rebels oppose the presence of Tehran (which sides with the Syrian Army).

Another obstacle to the success of Geneva II is the fragmentation of the opposition (both inside the country and abroad) and the consequent lack of representatives of the wide range of different groups, beside the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). In 2012, the international community recognised the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and was confident about an imminent end to the conflict. This group in exile, however, was not able to unify different elements of the opposition and it soon proved unable to lead a future transition of the country, due to its continuous splits.

One year later, it seemed very clear that the conflict was still far from ending and the situation on the ground had even worsened. The internal discussions by the Coalition on a possible engagement in negotiations with the regime contributed to further break up the opposition, leading to the establishment of the Islamic front, a coalition of several Islamist groups, who decided to join forces to detain the influence of al-Qaeda militants and build an Islamic state. The main rebel

14. Ibid.

15. Among them, the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States), the League of Arab States, the European Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and 26 other countries.

16. "Joint UN-Arab League envoy says over 30 nations invited to peace conference on Syria", 20/12/2013, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp/html/realfile/story.asp?NewsID=46796&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UsmUwfTulrU>

militia, the Free Syrian Army, refuse to sit at the negotiating table, as – for obvious reasons – do the jihadist forces and representatives of the Kurdish community.¹⁷

Conclusions

The next peace conference on Syria is skating on thin ice. Several positive elements that might facilitate negotiations emerged after the first meeting in Geneva in 2012 (such as the US-Iran nuclear deal or the agreement on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons), but the obstacles to finding a long-term solution to the conflict still seem too numerous. Against this backdrop, the 30 powers meeting in Switzerland should prioritise actions to stop the escalating violence and try to marginalise jihadist forces.

The presence of all actors involved (national and international) may be needed in order to develop a regional strategy, which was missing in the first peace conference. This would involve overcoming the reluctance towards Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, due to their leverage over the different factions of the conflict.

17. Ayad, C., "En Syrie, les kurdes prennent le large", *Le Monde*, 28/11/2013.