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The Road to Geneva 2 and the Challenges to a Negotiated Political Solution in Syria

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The Syrian conflict has long since descended into a protracted and bloody civil war, with the regime and the diverse groups that comprise the opposition locked in a painful stalemate, unable to tip the military balance of power in anyone's favor. The irony of the situation is that given the deep internal polarization, the ever-elusive military victory that all the warring parties seek cannot easily be translated into a political solution. A meaningful victory that ensures a halt to violence, preserves Syria's territorial integrity, and reinstitutes a measure of central control requires the main parties to make a political deal. At the very minimum, such agreement must provide mutual security guarantees while ensuring some degree of inclusion for all the main parties in a new political arrangement.

In this context, the Geneva 2 negotiations should be seen as a reflection of the reality on the ground and the importance of ending the conflict through a political deal. Reportedly scheduled to take place in late November 2013, the objective of the talks is to prompt the Syrian government and the opposition to move toward actualization of the June 2012 communique of the Action Group for Syria that urged full implementation of Annan's six-point peace plan, which focused on obtaining a stable ceasefire. The framework also calls for the creation of a "transitional governing body" selected on the basis of "mutual consent."

The notion of renewing the efforts launched in Geneva in June 2012 has gained additional traction in the weeks following the US-Russia entente on Syria's chemical weapons, with the UN Security Council endorsing the implementation of the June 2012 plan in Resolution 2128 on Syria's chemical arsenal. But even with these renewed international efforts, the challenges ahead are monumental.

First, with the parties lacking mutual trust and perceiving the conflict in zero-sum terms, finding a common denominator will prove extremely complicated. At the moment, the most basic, minimum demand of the opposition – namely that Bashar al-Assad not take part in the transitional government – goes beyond the realm of concessions the regime is

willing to make. The 2012 Geneva plan was deliberately ambiguous on this crucial issue, calling for an arrangement based on “mutual consent” but lacking specific reference to replace Bashar al-Assad, either as a precondition or as a predetermined result of the talks. This ambiguous wording was itself the result of a diplomatic bargain between the United States and Russia. Even so, following the October 22, 2013 meeting between the National Coalition and the “London 11,”¹ the main international backers of the opposition openly supported the request by the anti-Assad forces that neither Assad nor his closest allies be involved in the interim government. Not surprisingly, this interpretation clashes with that offered by Syrian government. Commenting on the Geneva 2 initiative, Syrian Vice-Premier Qadri Jamil provided the regime’s take on the “transition government clause” by emphasizing that “the key idea of the Geneva-2 conference is to create an expanded coalition government, which represents all circles of the society.”

Second, the current self-perceived strength of the Syrian regime further complicates attempts to strike a deal. Assad’s position has improved in the past weeks with increased international acceptance, if not legitimacy, due to his cooperation with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Domestically, the regime is politically stronger after averting an American military operation, and is benefitting from both recent military victories on the ground as well as the ongoing infighting within the opposition ranks. The Syrian regime can also still count on the steadfast support of its international cheerleaders in Moscow and Tehran. In this context, Assad is unlikely to soften his hard bargaining strategy with respect to the opposition. Indeed, after hearing about the upcoming peace talks, the Syrian President was quick to declare that he does not see how the conference could succeed, while declaring that he sees “no obstacle” to running again for office in the May 2014 presidential elections.

Third, the opposition displays a similar level of distrust toward the regime: George Sabra, president of the Syrian National Council (SNC), one of the main factions in the National Coalition, has stated that the SNC does not want to participate in the Geneva 2 talks and has threatened to leave the Coalition. The head of Free Syrian Army, General Salim Idriss, also reportedly said, “We support every political solution, but under one condition: Assad must be brought before a court,” a precondition that is also unlikely to be met in Geneva. In turn, the general level of skepticism and hesitancy of the opposition – already deflated after the threat of international military action subsided and following the decline in US support – further complicates the political process.

This is especially the case since the National Coalition, while being the main internationally recognized political representative of the Syrian opposition, has been

¹ This group includes the core “Friends of Syria” supporters: Britain, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

experiencing both internal tensions as well as a decline in its grass roots support. Indeed, within Syria, infighting between opposition groups has increased, while in the past few weeks prominent anti-Assad groups from the Salafi camp have openly denounced the Coalition and denied its role as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Moreover, on the battlefield the Free Syrian Army has long stopped being the main military challenger of the Assad regime, with competing groups from the jihadist and Salafist camp gaining in terms of both military victories and territorial and political control of the liberated areas.

The current divisions undermine the chances of a political solution because they make the opposition even more wary about making concessions, while also raising doubts about whether the National Coalition has the power to implement a political deal and guarantee that other factions uphold it.

Fourth, in order to succeed, the Geneva 2 talks need the international community to coordinate policy. Specifically, a united international community would require both Iran and Saudi Arabia to accept the political process and play a positive role in pushing both sides to make concessions. At the moment, while Russia and the United Nations envoy on Syria Lakhdar Barhimi have invited Tehran to Geneva, the Saudis have been ambivalent over the notion of having Iran sitting at the table in Geneva. Coordination and unity of purpose is also lacking when it comes to the external players supporting the Syrian opposition, and this is even more the case considering the Saudi-American fallout over Syria.

When taking these challenges into consideration, it is clear that the odds are not in Geneva 2's favor. Furthermore, the weeks preceding the negotiations may lead to an escalation in the level of violence within Syria as both parties try to improve their military position to increase their bargaining power in Geneva. Given this grim prospect, the international community should unite and put significant diplomatic and political pressure on all parties to find a compromise – an option as desirable as it is improbable.

