

Jan 20 2014

Syria: At Geneva II, Something to Fight For

LSE IDEAS

By Ivonne Lockhart Smith, International Policy Analyst at a law firm in London.



On 22 January ‘Geneva II’ talks between the Assad regime and the opposition will commence in Montreux, Switzerland, with Western stakeholders hoping that they will lead to a breakthrough in Syria’s worsening security and humanitarian crisis. Reviving this paralyzed process, which was inaugurated in June 2012 (in the ‘Geneva I’ talks) but which never really took off, is of paramount importance for the future of both Syrians in desperate need and the stability of the Middle East.

However, meaningful commitments on the Syrian political process are unlikely to result from this [UN-mediated](#) process. Washington and Moscow have had to apply sustained pressure merely to bring the opposition and the regime to the same table, and the political will of either party is notable by its absence. One third of the factious 120-member National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces rejects the talks, and jihadist groups continue to erode the control of Western-supported rebels on the ground. And above all, fundamental discrepancies prevail as to the purpose of the talks. Assad affiliates declare that the talks are to discuss countering terrorism, while for the opposition they are about the removal of Assad. In this regard, the establishment of a transitional post-Assad government with full executive powers – the only outcome remotely of interest to the opposition and foreshadowed by Geneva I’s [Six-Point Plan](#)– is unfeasible as long as the government continues to hold its ground against the rebels.

There is, however, some hope for progress on the humanitarian front, specifically an improvement in the delivery of life-saving aid. Getting such aid to those who need it most has been obstructed amidst Assad regime’s attempts to restrict food and other vital supplies to rebel-held areas. Indeed, the government has made the safe passage of humanitarian aid convoys conditional on locally brokered ceasefires, usually involving surrender. International leverage should be exerted to bring an end to this policy.

In the absence of international mediators to broker fair terms for the cessation of military operations, and monitor their compliance, the prospects for the estimated [245,000](#) people who remain unreached in besieged zones are bleak. In Geneva (where negotiations will take place towards the end of the week following a mostly ceremonial inauguration in Montreux), Russia and the US as the most influential players could in theory use their leverage at the highest level of office to ensure the unfettered and unconditional delivery of aid.

President Putin’s power over his protégé in Damascus has been demonstrated by Syria’s compliance with the [disposal of chemical weapons](#). It is therefore capable of swaying Assad to stop the regime from imposing sieges and creating conditional and brief truces in rebel-held areas. However, it is unclear to what extent Moscow might be interested in investing diplomatic energy in this, given that its global standing is less on the line than it was in relation to the chemical weapons dossier. Moscow’s appetite for concrete outcomes would ultimately stem from a strategic calculation that pushing the Assad regime to cede ground in certain areas around the table in order to mitigate the exacerbation of Islamic extremism outweighs the benefits of unconditional support for its ally. Insofar as commitments are made regarding humanitarian aid, getting these to work would require forceful action to ensure compliance.

The opening of humanitarian corridors and the establishment of unconditional ceasefires will only be possible if the Russian and the American governments commit first to impose outcomes on the respective parties, and potentially even invest military assets in doing so. How would international monitors otherwise do their job? Or how would humanitarian corridors be protected from artillery bombardments or small arms clashes, ensuring that vital assistance reaches its targets? Western governments struggle to find the answers to these hard questions, and even more so to gather support for coercive action – if necessary – from their domestic constituencies.

American officials, eager to put these questions to one side in order to gain traction on the political front, would still have to face them if the process is to be more than well-intentioned. The American electorate’s level of opposition to the use of force (or anything which resembles it) was evidenced most vividly in the aftermath of the Syrian government’s chemical weapons attacks in September last year. Paradoxically, even though this rejection of military options is why U.S. Secretary Kerry has

invested significant political capital in making a Geneva II conference happen, he may have to be prepared to consider the potential threat of coercive methods (or the tactical use of military assets) as essential to the process if it is to make any progress at all.

In the case of Syria, the 2012 Geneva I process essentially foundered as a result of the lack of enforcement, and if Geneva II is to work this lesson should be taken to heart. Back in 2011 and early 2012, ceasefires were not held. Neither the [UN nor Arab League monitors](#) were able to make the parties comply in the absence of robust backing from the Security Council in the form of sanctions or agreement on how to implement safe zones supported by the use of military assets. If such options have been ruled out by the White House now, then the prospects for a meaningful outcome at the talks in Switzerland are scant.

Deep-seated distrust, absence of political will, and the entrenched violence on the ground will make it difficult for the talks this week to shape any transitional process. There is also the danger that international stakeholders will use this meeting and any agreements that are reached at it to mask the lack of real progress in solving the conflict. However, if more effective delivery of humanitarian assistance to the more than [9.3 million](#) people in Syria in need of such assistance can be achieved, this is worth fighting for. For Western governments and the UN, hope remains that diplomacy may this time work. Washington should be ready to back this hope with all necessary means.

Author

Ivonne Lockhart Smith is an international policy analyst at a law firm in London and has an MSc in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

This entry was posted in [Middle East](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).