

Syria Peace Talks in Geneva: A Road to Nowhere

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On March 3, 2017, the United Nations' Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, concluded the last round of Syria peace negotiations in Geneva by saying that it was a step forward because it succeeded in securing a final agenda for another round of talks.

It is interesting to note that the new measure of progress in peace talks, according to the United Nations, is to create an agenda for the next round of talks! This reflects exactly how the negotiations in Geneva have become: a goal unto themselves, instead of providing a bridge to end the Syrian crisis, now entering its seventh year.

Prelude to the Geneva Communiqué of 2012

After the eruption of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Syrian opposition faced the mammoth task of building and structuring itself quickly. Due to the nature of Syrian authoritarianism, and the leaderless and ideology-less Syrian revolution at the time, the opposition had to be created as a fully representative body in a few months' time, which was virtually impossible.

The first attempt at organizing the opposition was the September 2011 establishment of the Syrian National Council (SNC), a loose alliance that emerged as a political umbrella for different Syrian opposition groups. The SNC used Istanbul as a base for all its activities. Peaceful protests continued in most of the Syrian cities without any ability to build a strong connection between the protesters on the ground and the leadership of the SNC in

Istanbul. The anti-government protests intensified but were not under the opposition's control. At the same time, the international community was focused elsewhere – on the fall of the Qadhafi regime and its aftermath.

The UN Security Council was united enough to pass Resolution 1973 to “protect the civilians” of Libya by all necessary means. However, the council later became divided and polarized on Syria when Russia and China began to veto statements critical of the Syrian regime. In 2011 and 2012, the council could not issue any condemnations of the continued violence by the Syrian government against its own people because Russia used its veto twice.

The Syrian opposition realized the need for building an international coalition outside the security council which could develop some options to protect the Syrian people. Thus, a “Friends of the Syrian People” group of nations was established and it held its first meeting in Tunisia in February 2012. Nothing came of that meeting, however, and another was arranged to be held in Istanbul. At that time, Turkey started talking about the need for safe zones and no-fly zones as a means to protect the Free Syrian Army and encourage more defections within President Bashar al-Asad's army.

Here started the gap between the high expectation of the Syrian opposition and regional powers like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and the international community and especially the United States, on the other. The Obama Administration was not

ready to move from political rhetoric to military action. The Syrian opposition realized that this makes the idea of “Friends of the Syrian People” useless, and the newly appointed Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria, Kofi Annan, discovered that he had very limited power over the parties involved in the conflict. Annan learned that the Security Council would not grant him the support he needed for his mission, so he decided to move in a different direction and the Geneva process started.

The Geneva Process

The Geneva Communiqué was announced by Kofi Annan on June 30, 2012 in Geneva, under the umbrella of the “Action Group for Syria.” However, neither the Syrian regime nor the opposition attended the meeting that formulated the plan. Embedded in the communiqué was the idea of “power sharing,” which had worked very well in Kenya according to Annan, who was the UN secretary general at that time. The Geneva Communiqué states that any political solution must be accepted by both parties, who have “mutual vetoes,” referring here to the Syrian government and the opposition. At the same time, it mentioned that the transfer of power should be done through what is called a “transitional governing body with full authorities.”

The Syrian government rejected the Geneva Communiqué and never said it would implement it. The six-point plan mentioned in

the statement, requiring full Syrian regime cooperation, outlined the “release of arbitrarily detained persons, especially persons involved in peaceful political activities” and “respecting freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed.”

As a result, the Syrian government realized that the transition would be inevitable if the Geneva Communiqué were implemented. Instead, the government decided to execute a large-scale detention campaign against the peaceful protesters while, at the same time, trying with all possible means to suppress the protests. They became larger in size, especially in Hama and Homs, and took place in more targeted locations in the heart of the big cities like Hama and Aleppo.

The Joint Special Envoy, Kofi Annan, decided to resign in August 2012. He stated later in an interview that the Security Council had not backed his efforts. Annan was criticized from almost everyone in the Syrian government and the opposition, both of whom were displeased because the former did not want any implementation of the plan, and the latter because he was not doing enough to implement it.

Annan’s replacement was the Algerian veteran diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, who stated he would continue to work on carrying out the principles of the Geneva Communiqué by convening a new meeting in Geneva of the two parties—the Syrian government and

opposition— to start direct negotiations to agree on the six-point plan.

The Syrian opposition formed a new body called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in Doha, after criticism that the Syrian National Council was not representative of the Syrian opposition. It agreed to attend the first direct talks with representatives from the Asad government in January 2014. Brahimi discovered that the gap between the two groups was huge. In addition, Russia did little to persuade the Syrian government to accept the Geneva Communiqué, which became part of the two Security Council resolutions 2042 and 2043. Brahimi, however, felt powerless and resigned in May 2014.

The war in Syria entered a new stage after the Ghouta chemical attack in August 2013, which killed at least 1,400 civilians on the outskirts of Damascus, among them 400 children. The ensuing deal between the United States and Russia asserted that the Syrian government give up its chemical weapons in order to avoid any military strikes by the Obama Administration.

The Vienna and Astana Tracks

Two months after the resignation of Joint Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed the Italian diplomat Staffan de Mistura to take his place. De Mistura had a new approach, one that brought all regional actors to the table to

negotiate as well as to enforce any deal on the domestic players. This is why he insisted on including Iran, despite the Islamic Republic's rejection of the Geneva Communiqué.

After the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria, the Obama Administration decided to conduct strikes against it in Raqqa without conferring with the Syrian government. Obama stated that to be able to eliminate ISIL from Syria, there needed to be a political transition that enabled the Syrian people to form a legitimate government that can unify them against terrorism. He instructed Secretary of State John Kerry to convince Russia to support his new approach toward Syria—fighting ISIL as a priority but, at the same time, supporting negotiations to forge a political settlement in the country.

Kerry and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov agreed to form two international tracks to deal with the Syria crisis, one to respond to the humanitarian crisis and implement Security Council resolution 2268, and another to convene a meeting in Vienna called the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which was held on November 14, 2015. Again, representatives of neither the Syrian government nor the opposition attended the meeting. The new group issued a statement acknowledging “the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process under the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and that both initiatives should move ahead expeditiously.” This agreement generated Security Council resolution 2254 in December 2015, which was

adopted unanimously and laid the foundation for the current Syrian negotiations in Geneva to end the conflict.

Since his appointment in January 2016, Joint Special Envoy de Mistura convened two rounds of talks in Geneva between the newly constituted opposition group, called the High Negotiation Committee (HNC), and the Syrian government. Like previous talks, there were no immediate results. The battle on the ground had started to shift in favor of the Syrian government after the Russian military intervention in September 2015. The second round of negotiations, in February 2017, formulated the agenda for the next round – this without any agreement on any of the issues discussed and mentioned in Security Council resolution 2254 regarding the constitution, governance, elections, and other pressing matters. The Syrian government insisted on adding terrorism to the list, but the opposition insisted on prioritizing the issue of transition as a key to discussing other issues.

The United States was almost absent in Syria during the last year of the Obama Administration. This led to the collapse of the ceasefire and an increase in the number of besieged areas as the Syrian government eliminated the opposition in Daraya and Aleppo, which created a vacuum filled by Russia. Moscow then started another initiative, called the “Astana track,” after the Syrian government recaptured the areas of Eastern Aleppo that had been under Syrian opposition control since 2012. Russia and Turkey, which

had become more frustrated by the United States because of its continued support of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD, or the Syrian version of the PKK), sponsored the “Astana track” with participation of the Syrian armed opposition for the first time. The focus was exclusively on the implementation of the ceasefire agreed to after the battles in Aleppo, but neither the Syrian government nor Russia had respected the ceasefire. The opposition discovered that the “Astana track” was a cover for the government to control more areas like the rebel-held al-Waer neighborhood in Homs. This is why the Syrian opposition decided not to participate in the second round of the “Astana track” earlier this month; for many of them, it signaled the end of the Astana talks.

Why the Geneva Talks Will Lead Nowhere

At present, the international community views the Syrian crisis as three separate crises, namely:

1. **Terrorism:** the emergence of terrorist groups in Syria like ISIL and Al-Qaeda, and the push to eliminate these organizations from Syria. This is a priority for the United States.
2. **Refugees:** the flight of a large number of Syrian refugees to neighboring countries then, under difficult conditions, their attempts to transit into Europe. This is a priority for the European Union.
3. **Political transition:** the need for political stability, stemming from the importance of achieving a political transition that allows Syrians to choose their president

and their political system. This is a priority for the Syrian opposition.

Unfortunately, the international community today is focused only on the first and second crises, showing no intention to back the political transition. Indeed, the negotiations held in Geneva did not make any political progress whatsoever after four rounds in four years.

Today, six years after the beginning of the peaceful protests in Syria, the need to have a political transition is more important than ever. It behooves the international community to develop a strategic plan to address these three crises together since they are interconnected. It is not possible to eliminate terrorism in Syria and return millions of refugees to their homes without forming a political and inclusive settlement that can put pressure on the Asad regime to achieve such a transition.

If the goal of such a transition is to put an end to the authoritarian regime in Damascus and build a new democratic, pluralistic, and non-sectarian system based on the principles of citizenship and equality of all citizens before the law, then all terrorist organizations and sectarian militias—like Iranian-backed groups, Hezbollah, and other Shiite militias—also should leave Syria. However, it is clear that all these rounds of negotiations did not lead to this goal. Reasons include the huge gap between the parties and their backers and disunity regarding an agenda, the conflicting agenda of the international players in Syria, like the United States and Russia, and the regional

players, like Turkey and Iran, which all make it nearly impossible to reach any agreement or to have meaningful talks that can lead to a workable solution.

The priority of the Syrian government and Russia continues to be returning Syria to its status before 2011—that is, under the full control of Asad's authoritarian governance. The United States, on the other hand, has put all its efforts toward getting rid of ISIL from Syria without any linkage to the importance of having a democratic transition in the country. Therefore, the new round of talks in Geneva will continue to lead nowhere.

The last six years have shown that employing the carrot-and-stick approach in Syria does not work because the Syrian regime knows the stick will not be used. From experience, Bashar al-Asad understands that the international community will not back its strong words with actions; this is why he still believes that he will be able to return Syria to its status quo ante. At the same time, Barack Obama realized that military force was needed to push the political solution he talked about many times; however, such a scenario would have involved a long-term commitment of the US military, which made him decide to devote all US resources to the fight against ISIL in Syria—thus leaving the political transition to be addressed by negotiations that have not led to any tangible outcome.

Syria has become the tragedy of our time. The international community has exhausted all the

options, including sanctions, diplomatic envoys, and political negotiations. None of them has worked. It may now be time to use the carrot-and-stick approach with Asad, this time following through to effect change. The safe zones that President Donald Trump has

proposed may be an effective way to force the Asad government to take negotiations seriously and accept the reality of the need for a transition in Syria. This could be a way to save what is left of Syria.

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