



The Syria conference: last exit peace?

by Florence Gaub

On May 7, Russia and the United States agreed to host a conference (in June in Geneva) with an aim to settling the Syrian crisis. This would be the first occasion that unites Syrian opposition and regime representatives at ministerial level. It also takes place at a time of heightened expectations that a solution to a conflict that has displaced 1.5 million Syrians and cost at least 70,000 lives will finally be found. While the conference can arguably be seen as a breakthrough in and for itself, a successful outcome depends on a number of delicate factors.

Participation

A conference can be considered a success only when the decisions taken there have binding value to all the conflicting parties. In order to achieve this, the event needs to assemble the right kind and level of participants: the more stakeholders are present, the more binding the conference's outcome will be. This is particularly true if an excluded stakeholder has the potential to sabotage the agreed peace process. In Syria's case, the key stakeholders are of course the regime in Damascus and the opposition, as well as Turkey, Russia, the United States, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, the European Union - and Iran.

Suspected to support the regime with weapons as much as personnel, and itself under sanctions because of its alleged nuclear weapons programme, Iran was not invited to the first Syria conference

held in June 2012 in Geneva. Russia, another key player in the Syrian crisis, supported Iran's attendance at 'Geneva-I' and has already made clear that it wishes Iran to be present at 'Geneva-II' (as the upcoming conference is referred to). This is in line with Iran's own expectations, as its Vice President Mohammad-Javad Mohammadzadeh declared: "Iran expects to be part of the process to restore peace and a better livelihood to the people of Syria". At the time of writing, it was not clear whether Iran would be present at the conference, as France has voiced objections against it. What is clear, however, is that whether absent or present, Iran will influence the outcome either way.

Both the Syrian regime and the opposition have indirectly confirmed attendance, which would thus become the first time for them to meet at an official gathering. Preconditions raised on earlier occasions have been dropped, meaning that both sides have accepted to engage with the representatives from the other camp regardless of whether they 'have blood on their hands'. It is also likely that the approach will be diplomatic rather than confrontational, which explains the decision to hold the meeting at ministerial rather than head-of-state level. In the latter scenario, in fact, the sheer presence of President Bashar al-Assad (whose fate remains a key bone of contention) would fuel an adversarial dynamic.

Another important point related to the conference is the amount of authority representatives will

have to speak and make concessions on behalf of the party/faction they represent. This is unlikely to be a major problem for the regime (which forms an apparently cohesive front) but might become one for the opposition. Already fragmented on the political side between the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) - its main political body - and other, smaller factions such as the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, the political level has had difficulties asserting its control over the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

This is reflected in the FSA's initial rejection of SNC-appointed Prime Minister Ghassan Hitto and its quick and rather self-confident declaration that it will not attend 'Geneva-II', although no invitation had even been issued. Yet any decision taken at the conference will have to be accepted by the FSA and other political players - or be supported by an actor capable of enforcing it against their will.

Agenda

In principle, 'Geneva-II' will build upon the agreement reached at 'Geneva-I' in 2012, which clearly outlined the steps to be taken in order to settle the conflict. These include (apart from and beyond the immediate cessation of violence) the establishment of a transitional government, the review of the constitutional order, and free multi-party elections.

This agreement presents, however, a number of shortfalls as it came into being without either warring faction being present. Consequently, the Syrian regime has already declared that it will not be a party to any meeting that would 'harm national sovereignty' - which includes the fate of the president, and the form of government as well as the constitution. According to the regime in Damascus, any of these are only be changed by the Syrian people 'through the ballot boxes' during the next presidential elections, to be held in 2014.

That being said, the regime enacted a new constitution in 2012 which nominally includes some of the required changes, such as a multi-party system and the limitation of the president's mandate to two terms. Although the ensuing referendum that approved the constitutional change can hardly be considered fair, it is evident that the Syrian regime - under these circumstances - sees no need to discuss a new constitution. This limits the scope of the conference's agenda considerably, given that the government's own composition, performance and legitimacy are indeed at the heart of the conflict.

It is therefore to be expected that the agenda will focus, at least initially, on those aspects which are not only less contentious but may ultimately help create the necessary conditions for further political talks. These include the implementation of a ceasefire, the establishment of humanitarian corridors, and the release of political prisoners. This might not be enough for some of the stakeholders present - Turkey has already made explicit demands to the United States that it wishes for concrete outcomes rather than more diplomatic talks which would only buy al-Assad time.

Potential outcomes

The agreement to meet can per se be considered a major success. Nevertheless, the conference harbours a few risks as well. If decisions made on the occasion are ignored or contested by actors on the ground (e.g. a ceasefire by the FSA), this could cast doubt on the representativeness of actors present at the conference and thereby put into question the legitimacy and effectiveness of any process initiated there. Similarly, the exclusion of certain parties could lead to them deliberately torpedoing the whole process, which could in turn lead to more violence on the ground.

Yet the conference presents opportunities as well: albeit timidly, it signals a dent in the zero-sum-game thinking that has prevailed so far, since both sides have agreed to meet without preconditions. As in any peace negotiation, the challenge now is to help the conflicting parties formulate non-exclusionary demands which have a realistic chance of being implemented. A single conference is unlikely to achieve this (or more), but it is a start.

Just like other international players who have committed themselves to a political rather than military solution, the European Union has an interest in seeing at least a modest success emerge from 'Geneva-II'. The conference's failure would discredit the political solution at large and be a boon to those who advocate the military option. In this context, a credible and lasting ceasefire could be considered a major achievement.

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