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**Between Paralysis and Fatigue:
The “Geneva 2” Negotiations on the Syrian Civil War
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On January 22, 2014 representatives of the international community once again reconvened in Switzerland in an attempt to broker a negotiated agreement to end the bloody Syrian civil war. Since the last round of international talks in June 2012 (“Geneva 1”), the situation in Syria has deteriorated drastically. Current statistics indicate that the war, which began nearly three years ago, is responsible for some 130,000 fatalities and over half a million people wounded. The conflict has caused a major humanitarian emergency, with over 6.5 million internally displaced persons and two million refugees, and with half of the Syrian population in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

While the humanitarian situation has gotten worse, none of the warring parties is today substantially closer to a military victory than at the time of the Geneva 1 talks: on the contrary, despite a number of tactical victories by the regime, the painful stalemate continues and the conflict has become even more fragmented, with concomitant conflicts occurring between the regime and the opposition, as well as within different segments of the anti-Assad camp.

Facing both the staggering humanitarian cost as well as the dangerous implications of the civil war in terms of regional stability and radicalization, the international community has finally convened to discuss the actualization of the June 2012 Geneva 1 plan, aimed at implementing a ceasefire and moving toward the establishment of a “transitional governing body” with “full executive powers” selected on the basis of “mutual consent” between the regime and the opposition.

However, the chances that these ambitious objectives will be fulfilled in the coming days are exceptionally grim, first and foremost because the parties lack any reciprocal trust, and second, because their respective demands reflect entirely opposite positions.

Bashar al-Assad’s regime comes to Geneva (or rather to nearby Montreux, where the summit is actually taking place) sensing it is in a position of relative strength: following the chemical weapons deal of a few months ago, the regime is convinced it has gained a

measure of international acceptance, if not outright recognition. This self-perception has been reinforced by the growing international concern with respect to the rise of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria, and by the recent revelations concerning secret meetings between members of the Syrian regime and Western intelligence agencies to discuss the role of jihadist foreign fighters in Syria. Indeed, shielded by the chemical weapons deal and strengthened by analysts and policymakers arguing that the international community may need to choose between Assad and al-Qaeda, the Syrian regime’s international position has improved over the past six months. In addition, Assad can still count on his Russian ally, which in the past two months has continued to veto any UNSC resolutions condemning the Syrian President or his regime, while announcing both increased military assistance and striking a lucrative 25-year offshore oil and gas exploration deal with Syria.

Domestically, Assad’s actions in the period leading up to Geneva 2 revealed a similar strategy based on a perception of strength and impunity: testimonies to this are both the massive military assault – often perpetrated with indiscriminate and brutal barrel bombs – against rebel-controlled areas of Aleppo, as well as the policy of starvation and denial of humanitarian assistance to specific rebel strongholds, such as the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus (where assistance was finally allowed in the days before Geneva 2).

Put simply: Bashar al-Assad is not prepared to negotiate a political transition that is premised on his own departure, as the Geneva 1 framework of “mutual consent” seemed to imply (although the Syrian regime certainly contests this interpretation). The Syrian regime sees itself on the winning side of the war, and Bashar al-Assad’s recent declarations regarding the need to focus the Geneva 2 talks on “terrorism,” combined with his delegation’s statement that discussing the President’s dismissal is a “red line,” confirm this impression.

On the other side of the negotiating table, the opposition is not in a better position to discuss a mutually agreed end to the hostilities. First, the anti-Assad camp is justifiably skeptical of the regime’s intentions, especially as it appears clear that their minimal demand (Assad’s departure) is unlikely to be accepted, and given Assad’s past history of relying on ceasefires to regroup and crack down on his adversaries.

Second, in the past few months, the internationally recognized “representative of the Syrian people,” the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, has continued to lose clout within Syria. With the Free Syrian Army lacking the ability to conduct the bulk of the fighting against Assad, and with the rise of jihadist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as well as the increasingly powerful and organized Salafist-coalition the “Islamic Front,” the anti-Assad camp remains

fundamentally divided. The result is that the National Coalition’s political leadership is challenged on multiple fronts. In turn, this impacts negatively on the capacity of the opposition’s delegation to Montreux to negotiate with the regime, as well as on its ability to ensure that an eventual agreement is implemented and enforced on the ground. The political negotiations with the regime are also highly risky for the weakened National Coalition, as delivering a “bad deal” would further discredit it within its own constituency, also potentially jeopardizing the group’s internal cohesion.

In this context of distrust, divisions, and reluctance it is hard to envision any significant breakthrough emerging from Geneva 2. This is also the case since the international community is itself sharply divided and lacks a clear and coordinated strategy to pressure the parties to a deal. At the very minimum, this would require an American-French-Russian-Turkish-Saudi-Iranian coordinated approach on how to solve the crisis – an option that, however desirable and necessary in the context of a truly regional crisis like the Syrian one, also appears completely unrealistic. This is especially the case given that Iran – refusing to recognize the terms set in Geneva 1 and facing the anti-Assad camp’s strong rejection to its participation to Geneva 2 – has been unceremoniously uninvited in an especially clumsy sequence of events preceding the official opening of the talks.

Given this discouraging outlook, what could be the best outcome of the Geneva 2 talks?

The conference should be focused on providing some measure of relief to the Syrian population, the main victim of the current conflict, by focusing on ensuring full humanitarian access. Negotiating a ceasefire starting with the besieged city of Aleppo, along with a prisoner exchange, as recently proposed by the regime, should also be discussed with the notion that these measures should not inadvertently be translated into gains for the regime, nor should they be used by the regime to seed further division within the ranks of the opposition. As a precondition for the April 2012 ceasefire, for example, Assad first demanded that the rebels withdraw and disarm; a later stipulation demanded the rebels’ withdrawal as a condition for allowing humanitarian aid – requests that clearly defeat the neutrality of these measures. It is crucial that Geneva 2 not become a platform for approving similar requests.

