

Syria after Geneva 2: More 'Dirty War' but also Some Hope

By [Prof. Tim Anderson](#)

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While little of substance seemed to come from the Geneva 2 peace conference and the dirty war against Syria seems set to continue, this does not mean the process has not advanced.

John Kerry still mouths the 2011 mantra 'Assad must go', but it is much less convincing. Remember, Washington put great pressure on the rag-tag National Coalition to attend Geneva and speak directly, for the first time, to the Syrian Government.

Combined with the US backdown last September, in face of Russian resistance, this represents a strong message to exile and all other anti-Assad groups: we will not send in our air power, whatever new 'humanitarian intervention' stunts you may pull; we may allow the Saudis to keep providing arms but you must fight your own fight, including diplomacy.

While tens of thousands of foreign-backed sectarian fighters still assail Syria's cities, many western analysts concede that the Assad government has reached 2014 in a stronger position - even though the conflict is not close to an end.

Joshua Landis, in Al Jazeera, said the Syrian Government delegation at Geneva spoke from a position of strength, due to the loyalty of the Syrian Army, its superior weapons and the 'fragmentation and radicalization of rebel fighting forces'. However Landis (like David Cortright of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies) also adopts the misleading sectarian theme that the conflict is Sunni Muslims versus the rest.

Ayham Kamel, of the London-based Eurasia group, says after the failure to remove the Syrian Government by force, 'we are in a different world, where an Assad ouster is no longer realistic in the near term'.

Several of the more critical analysts remain cynical, given the duplicity of the US and its unaltered ambition for 'regime change' in Syria, as the next step towards a Washington-shaped 'New Middle East'.

For example Ajamu Baraka (Black Agenda Report, 'The Obama Administration's Orwellian Subterfuge') correctly points to the 'astonishing hypocrisy of US policies', in claiming to back 'democracy, pluralism and the human rights of the Syrian people', while supporting al Qaeda groups. Similarly, Pepe Escobar (RT: 'Syria and the Geneva 2 Charade') calls the Geneva process a 'pitiful charade even before it started', lamenting the inept management by Ban Ki-Moon and poking fun at stories about the 'good' and 'bad' al Qaeda.

Yet cynicism alone does not help chart the progress of and challenges for Syrian resistance, and a range of factors are slowly shifting the balance in favour of Syria.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Geneva 2 had gone 'as expected', praising the 'breakthrough in relations' between the Syrian government and exile 'opposition'. In typically understated terms he called the decision by UN Secretary-General Ban to invite and then 'univite' Iran 'a mistake but not a catastrophe'. Importantly, Lavrov flagged the future role in talks of 'other domestic opposition groups', including the Kurdish committees.

It takes a little patience to find hope in the ashes. Geneva 2 did not achieve any real cessation of hostilities, in particular it did not stop the outside support for tens of thousands of sectarian killers (takfiris), mostly foreigners from 83 countries and mistakenly called 'rebels'. Indeed, the new pattern emerging is that the US has withdrawn to play 'good cop', urging protection of the Syrian people from a horrendous 'regime', while its partner-in-crime the 'bad cop' Saudis fund various al Qaeda styled groups.

However these takfiri 'rebels' have made no strategic advances on the ground in many months, they are deeply divided to the point of serious internecine warfare and their main achievement in recent months (e.g. with the Adra massacre) has been to show that they can 'bleed' Syria. Every day they kill people, attack infrastructure, including power lines, hospitals and schools. Yet they are also killed and wiped out in entire groups, by the Syrian Arab Army.

If there is no immediate relief from these daily attacks, demoralising as they are for the Syrian people, the longer terms disadvantages rest more heavily on the NATO-aligned 'rebels'.

First, their fragmentation continues to work against them. Lack of unity is the main reason why Washington dumped the Syrian National Council (more tightly controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood) in favour of the 'National Coalition', now led by Saudi nominee Ahmad Jarba. Yet this Coalition is also divided and, crucially, cannot speak on behalf of the sectarian fighters, almost all of whom rejected Geneva 2.

Second, there is a domestic political agenda, driven by the Syrian constitution which demands a Presidential election by mid-2014. Yet the 'National Coalition' has effectively locked itself out. The Syrian Government was open to constitutional change, but none was seriously proposed at Geneva. Jarba said that a transitional government which excludes Bashar al Assad 'is the only topic for us'. Yet there are at least ten Syrian political parties (1), other than the ruling Ba'ath Party, saying they will participate. Indeed the constitutional reforms voted in in early 2012 have facilitated their participation.

Some western governments will label these parties 'dupes of the regime', and will continue to ignore them when a Syrian 'opposition' is spoken of. However that will influence neither Iran nor Russia, who recognise the civil opposition and insist on 'normal elections'. This normalisation process will be appealing to the BRIC countries, the Latin Americans, Africans and some of the Europeans. Even dithering, pro-Washington UN officials like Ban Ki-Moon may feel obliged to respond reasonably.

The abstentionist position of the Jarba-led National Coalition will work against them. They have failed to remove Bashar militarily, have little credibility with the takfiri armed groups (except as arms suppliers), and have lost all hope of direct US intervention. Their problem is that the civil opposition within Syria will gradually displace them, in the international arena.

This reminds me of the US-backed opposition to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, during the

National Assembly elections of late 2005. They refused to participate, calling the elections a sham, no doubt hoping for another US-backed military coup. It never came. The result was this opposition excluded itself from national politics for several years.

Takfiri and Muslim Brotherhood groups in Syria face two additional hurdles. The Syrian constitution maintains its ban on political parties based on 'religious' or 'sectarian' grounds (Article 8.4), and presidential candidates must have been resident in Syria for the previous ten years (Article 84). The only opportunity to challenge this, and to call for change through a referendum, was at Geneva 2. Whatever might have been possible, that moment has passed.

So what are the future possibilities?

It is certainly true that the US maintains its 'regime change' preference, but it is also flexible. Any great power develops options, or back-up plans. Direct regime change by dirty war or direct intervention has failed; balkanisation of the country also seems highly unlikely. However Washington may settle for a third option: allowing the Saudis (driven by their own fear of Iran and a supposed regional Shia conspiracy) to keep funding the takfiri armies for years, so as to weaken Syria. Israel might also settle for this. Presidential adviser Dr Bouthaina Shaaban says the destruction of Syrian institutions (e.g. hospitals, schools, power supply) was a key objective, from the beginning of the conflict.

But how sustainable is this third option? It is true that the Saudis have virtually unlimited money, dozens of television channels that spew out sectarian messages and they enjoy access to an almost unending international supply of poorly educated religious fanatics.

However these same groups will face exhaustion with no strategic advances and constant death in face of the militarily superior, better organised and much larger Syrian Arab Army. Moreover, being mostly foreign and overwhelmingly sectarian, they maintain very little popular support, not least from the Sunni Muslim communities they claim to represent. Syrian society, whether pro-government or not, remains strongly nationalist and proud of the country's deep pluralist traditions.

Nevertheless, there seems no rapid end to the conflict unless Russia succeeds in some decisive move against Riyadh, the chief sponsor of terrorism in the region. The likelihood of this increased significantly when Moscow linked the Saudis to the recent terrorist bombing in Volgograd. President Putin has long known of Saudi support for sectarian attacks in Chechnya, as also the Chechen sectarian Islamists in Syria. He probably does not want to further inflame things on the eve of the Winter Olympics, and is very conscious of US backing for Riyadh. However he is not a person to sit back when Russia is attacked.

Geneva 2 marked a turning point in the crisis. We can expect more attempts at pulling proverbial 'rabbits out of the hat', like the Qatari stunt of releasing pictures of masses of dead bodies on the eve of the conference. However the balance has shifted away from the 'regime change' gang and back towards an independent Syria.

Note

1. Syrian 'civil opposition' political parties, other than the Ba'ath Party include: Syrian Social Nationalist Party, Unified Syrian Communist Party, Arab Socialist Union Party, National Pact Party, Unionist Socialist Democratic Party, Arab Democratic Union Party, Democratic

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