

The Geneva Conference on Syria: What Will It Deliver?

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The UN has convened an international conference on Syria to meet in Montreux, Switzerland, starting from January 22, 2014. Thirty odd states, including India, will attend. The US is standing in the way of Iran's participation. Secretary of State John Kerry has contended that Iran should accept the decisions taken at the first conference on Syria held in June 2012 in Geneva. Iran did not attend that conference, it was not even invited. Incidentally, though the forthcoming conference is not going to be held in Geneva, for convenience, it is called Geneva 2.

Kerry is not entirely right in insisting that Iran should accept the decisions or conclusions of the previous conference. The final communiqué in June 2012 said that there should be a transitional government consisting of members of the government in power and the opposition. About President Assad's role or non-role in the transition there was no agreement. The US announced post-conference that it was agreed that he should go, but Russia made it clear that there was no such agreement.

No concrete results came out of that conference and in protest the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan resigned. If Kerry is expecting Iran to announce publicly that it will agree to Assad's exit or even to negotiate that, he is not being realistic. Obviously, he wants to prevent Iran's participation. His earlier proposal for Iran to participate 'from the sidelines' has been, as expected, rejected by Iran.

Russia has stated clearly that Iran's absence will prevent the conference from delivering the intended results. Most observers will agree with Russia on this. Without Iran's support, military, economic, and moral, President Assad might not have survived till now. According to the US sources, since signing the interim nuclear deal on November 24, 2013, Iran has sent 330 truck loads of arms and equipment to Syria through Iraq. This is in addition to whatever is sent by air through Iraqi airspace. Any expectation that the interim nuclear deal would change Iran's stand on Syria has proved wrong. The US has so far failed to stop Iraq from letting Iran use its territory for sending supplies to Syria. Both Iraq and Iran support President Assad.

The US has another problem in agreeing to Iran's participation. It has strained relations with Saudi Arabia. That country was expecting a US military strike on Syria after President Obama made an announcement months ago clearly indicating an imminent strike. When Obama changed his mind owing to opposition from the Congress, partly triggered by the UK Prime Minister's failure to get approval from the Commons for joining in such a strike, Saudi Arabia was much upset. It refused to accept the Security Council seat it won. If Iran is invited, Saudi Arabia might not attend and in any case its discord with the US will get worse. One may assume that Kerry knows the cost of preventing Iran from attending, but he does not have much room for maneuvering.

Apart Iran's likely absence, there is another shadow hanging over the conference. It is not clear who will attend from the Syrian opposition. The Syrian National Coalition, also known as Syrian Opposition Coalition is going to take a decision in a meeting starting on January 17. The meeting is on in Istanbul. Recently, 44 out of the 112 members of the Coalition decided to leave it at another meeting held in Istanbul as they are against taking part in the conference.

The opposition wants an assurance that Assad will leave office before agreeing to attend the conference. The opposition is in disarray and it knows that it lacks the clout to extract any such commitment. If it believes that the US is in a position to put further pressure on Assad through Russia that is an erroneous assumption. Pressure from the US is mounting on the Syrian opposition to attend. At this moment no one knows whether they will attend. If they attend it will be under duress.

The Kurds, a significant player in the unfolding tragedy are divided about attending the conference. The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party will attend, reluctantly, as part of the Coalition. But, Democratic Union Party is not willing to attend as part of the Coalition; it wants to be an independent participant. The convener will not agree to have a separate Kurdish delegation.

The Syrian Government can, ironically enough, derive some comfort from the sorry state of affairs. It has made it clear that Assad's position is not negotiable. It has added one more caveat: Decisions taken in Montreux would be put to a referendum and only the people of Syria will take the final decision. One would need enormous optimism to believe that the present conditions in Syria are suitable for a free and fair referendum with participation from a majority of Syrians as almost 7 million are refugees inside the country, not to mention the 2.4 million outside. Obviously, the Syrian government is playing diplomatic games.

Syria has told Russia that it is prepared to accept a cease-fire in Aleppo and that exchange of prisoners can be considered. The opposition does not trust that the government is

sincere. The government wants the conference to focus on the need to fight terrorism and in its eyes any one who is fighting the government is a terrorist.

The conference is taking place as the situation in Syria is getting worse by day. Nobody knows how many have been killed by the rebels and the Syrian government forces. UN has been mentioning a figure of 100,000 deaths. It has also clarified that since early January it has ceased to count as it is very difficult to get reliable information on deaths. The London based Syrian Observatory has arrived at a figure of 130,000. A Syrian has privately told the author that the correct number might be much higher as bodies have been disposed off in bulk without any one even bothering to count.

2.4 million have fled the country and 6.5 million refugees inside. In a jail in Damascus (Military Security Branch 15) the daily death toll from torture and lack of food has gone up to 30. 40% of the hospitals have been destroyed. There is severe shortage of food and other essential items for two reasons. One, the genuine shortage. Other, the government is deliberately denying supplies to areas controlled by rebels where substantial number of civilians still remain.

The military situation has turned to the advantage of Assad in certain places, but essentially it is a stalemate and no checkmate is possible now or in the near future, perhaps, never. Iran and Hezbollah have sent in men and materiel. The opposition is badly divided. They are fighting among themselves. Saudi Arabia is actively helping a group. US and UK stopped sending ‘non-lethal’ aid when what they supplied was taken away by the Islamic Front. There are signals that the aid might be resumed, probably to encourage participation in the conference.

There was the third donor conference in Kuwait on January 15. UN has asked for contributions totaling \$ 6.5 billion for 2014. The target was \$ 836 million in 2012 and \$4 billion in 2013. The targets were not met in 2012 and 2013. It might not be met in 2014 too. So far, the contributions announced totals up to \$2.4 billion. There is a larger question. Even if the full amount comes in will the needy get relief? Last week a UN convoy to Yarmouk with a population of 6000 had to be withdrawn as it was shot at despite government’s assurance of safe passage. The Red Cross (ICRC) is finding it extremely difficult to operate. WHO had to abandon a vaccination programme in the north as it could not be sure of the safety of its employees.

The Shia-Sunni discord in Lebanon and Iraq have got aggravated because of Syria. Assad’s exit, if it happens, it is said, will open a Pandora’s box. Yet, without being cynical one might say that the box is already wide open. The conference in Montreux will yield limited results at the most. US and Russia have been talking about opening ‘humanitarian corridors’ and local cease-fires.

Does the Syrian government expect the conference to take Syria closer to a negotiated political solution to the crisis? Its national reconciliation minister, Ali Haidar, has said the conference will not end the war. "Don't expect anything from Geneva II," he told a seminar in Damascus. "Neither Geneva II, nor Geneva III nor Geneva X will solve the Syrian crisis. *The solution has begun, and will continue through the military triumph of the state ... and through the staying power and resilience of the state and all its institutions in the face of its enemies who were betting on its collapse.*" (Italics added.) It is difficult not to conclude that it non-Syrians who are keen to have the conference.

There is no end in sight to the civil war raging in Syria. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told the donor conference in Kuwait on the 15th January 2014, "I hope this will launch a political process to establish a transitional governing body with a full executive powers, and most importantly, end the violence." Against overwhelming evidence, let us hope that he will be proved right for the sake of Syria as we see the horrendously mounting level of human suffering to no purpose.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.