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Issue Brief

Geneva 4: Talks about talks?

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"The train is ready, it is in the station, it is warming up the engine. Everything is ready, it just needs an accelerator"¹-

This was stated by UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura at the conclusion of the Geneva negotiations. These talks were essentially a peace dialogue between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition under the patronage of the United Nations. The Syrian opposition groups comprised of the High Negotiation Committee, (HNC) the main umbrella group as well as the so-called Moscow and Cairo groups². Also known as Geneva 4, the negotiations were held from February 23- March 3, 2017. These talks - the first since April 2016 - were the latest effort to seek to end a conflict that began in March 2011 with protests against Syrian regime leader Bashar al Assad. The conflict will enter its seventh year on March 15. Since then, more than 310,000³ people have been killed and hundreds of thousands have fled the country, promoting instability in neighbouring countries and creating Europe's biggest migrant crisis since World War II.

For nine days, seasoned diplomat Staffan De Mistura engaged in day-to-night proxy talks with a delegation representing the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and three opposition groups. All parties involved only congregated for the opening ceremony. This moment, rich in symbolism could not be repeated after nearly 10 days of strained talks. Despite some moments of friction, diplomats and analysts who had come to observe the tricky process, ascribed the gathering of political dissidents and military commanders for maintaining their composure.

From the start, it seemed that the diplomatic bar for this round of Syrian talks could not have been set any lower. Even Mr. De Mistura started the talks saying he expected no breakthroughs and that just keeping everyone at the table should be viewed as an accomplishment in itself.

"This is a war of six years where people were not even looking at each other. They were just fighting each other," De Mistura noted. He said his team had presented all delegations a paper outlining 12 different points summarizing the commonalities shared by "all those who care about Syria."⁴

¹ <http://www.thelocal.ch/20170306/genevas-syria-talks-end-on-more-positive-note>

² <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSKBN15R0WE>

³ <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/03/peace-talks-produce-clear-agenda-war-scarred-syria/>

⁴ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/979efaf4a4cd48b586da4c25f892dfed/syrian-troops-after-taking-palmyra-clear-explosives>

The UN announced the latest talks ended on a more encouraging note than the previous meetings, since the Syrian regime and opposition had finally agreed upon a "clear agenda" to seek to end the country's six-year-old war.⁵

However, momentum was hard to achieve in Geneva. Every time it seemed one hurdle had been cleared, another obstacle would appear. Case in point: a much hyped meeting between the main Syrian opposition delegation and Russian deputy foreign minister which finally took place on March 1, 2017 was deemed significant because it was an indication that Russia which backs Syrian President Bashar al-Assad may be willing to apply pressure on al Assad's government to continue discussing the idea of political transition. By the next morning though, the message from Moscow was quite different, with the Russian foreign ministry publicly accusing the HNC of trying to sabotage the talks.

On March 3, marathon talks were held in a final attempt to salvage the process. De Mistura held back-to-back meetings on this day, first meeting with two minor opposition groups - the Moscow and Cairo platforms - and later speaking with the Syrian government delegation and the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), the central opposition umbrella group.⁶ While the opposition pointed to signs of making headway during the talks, and praised De Mistura for seeming more engaged in the conflict than before, violence in Syria threatened to disrupt the discussions.

The HNC said the latest Geneva talks were "more positive" than previous rounds. We are closing this round without (a) clear result... but I can say this time was more positive,"⁷

The Government representatives, meanwhile, accused the opposition of taking the talks "hostage", alleging that some members of its delegation belonged to "armed terrorist groups".⁸

By nightfall on the final day, De Mistura said he would like to see Syrians government and opposition pursue a framework agreement in accordance with the UN security council resolution 2254, stating:

"While it remains our goal to secure an agreement, to move to direct negotiations, between the government and the oppositions, at the moment we have noticed, as was the case in Astana too, that

⁵ <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/nation-world/world/article136163838.html>

⁶ <https://attwiw.com/2017/03/05/conflict-update-march-2-2017/>

⁷ The main opposition High Negotiating Committee (HNC) said the latest Geneva talks were "more positive" than previous rounds. "We are closing this round without (a) clear result... but I can say this time was more positive," HNC delegation chief Nasr al-Hariri told reporters.

⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/de-mistura-syria-talks-geneva-clear-agenda-170303202045570.html>

there is a moment when it is in fact more effective to have proxy meetings and discussions, like we have had this time."⁹

Resolution 2254, adopted by the UN Security Council in 2015, lays the practicalities for a political transition based on three subjects; accountable governance, a new constitution and UN-supervised elections within 18 months.¹⁰ The first three subjects were given an implementation target date of six months, while the fourth subject- terrorism- was linked with separate Russian-led talks in Kazakhstan's Astana, expected to take place on March 14, 2017.

But, the UN envoy asked parties involved to adhere caution stating there were "people in Syria and outside who still believe there is a military option or a military solution." This he labelled a "fantasy".¹¹

De Mistura said the Geneva talks had the support of Turkey, Russia and Iran. The three countries are the guarantors of a cessation of hostilities agreement adjudicated in Astana in January 2017.¹² Geneva peace talks are running in parallel with negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan, which are focused on maintaining a fragile ceasefire agreed upon in December. A new Astana meeting is expected to take place before the next Geneva talks Geneva 5 is expected to take place later in March¹³. "Astana and Geneva are complementing themselves, and reinforcing each other,"¹⁴ affirmed De Mistura.

While the deadlines which have been set will no doubt be difficult to meet, Mr. De Mistura seemed confident he could keep this very complicated process on track. However, he acknowledged the gravity of the task ahead; "If we don't have productive talks, (the) cease-fire won't last," he said. "We are really working hand in hand but there are two hands."¹⁵

Even though no significant breakthrough has been achieved, it is still uplifting to see that the parties involved have acknowledged that the talks ended on a positive note before they proceed on to further negotiations, scheduled for late March. The main point to remember is that despite the efforts that are being made to find a diplomatic solution, the prospects of success will continue to be bleak until all

⁹ <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/03/03/512882/Syria-UN-Staffan-de-Mistura-Geneva-HNC>

¹⁰ <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2017/03/04/syria-has-geneva-talks-ended-with-clear-agenda-as-de-mistura-said/>

¹¹ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/syrian-troops-taking-palmyra-clear-explosives-093449418.html>

¹² http://hosted2.ap.org/APDEFAULT/cae69a7523db45408eeb2b3a98c0c9c5/Article_2017-03-03-ML--Syria/id-26f6903f20fb45178da39b1e9f70d39e

¹³ <https://www.thelocal.ch/20170306/genevas-syria-talks-end-on-more-positive-note>

¹⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4278520/Syria-peace-talks-inch-forward-diplomatic-pressure.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/un-mediator-wraps-up-tough-syria-talks-in-geneva/1000427>

parties put their differences and individual agendas aside and focus on the bigger picture: the future of the Syrian people.