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GENEVA II

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Abstract:

The round of negotiations known as Geneva II between the opposing sides in the Syrian Civil War has ended. Despite the lack of concrete results, the intentions for further meetings are a modest but significant success. At least, the possibility of specific humanitarian actions is closer, but political negotiation must wait for subsequent similar events.

Keywords:

Geneva II, Syrian Civil War, peace talks.

INITIAL EXPECTATIONS

The Geneva II rounds of negotiations, which were actually held in Montreux, closed on January 31, had initially raised legitimate expectations. The United Nations' mediation, their invitation to all parties involved to participate; and the US's and Russia's obvious urge, with the Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the Russian Foreign Affairs minister, Sergei Lavrov's interventions at the opening session, to then give way to the regime and opposition speeches, would make possible the face to face encounter with the Syrian regime and the opposition.

However, several facts hindered the negotiation's possibility of success. First, the difficulty in defining the representation of the opposing side. Represented in the Syrian National Coalition (NCSROF), the determination of their representatives has been difficult, precisely because of the multiple and diverse character of the orientations and positions enclosed under this term. The UN's Special Representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, mediator of the meeting, declared that the composition of the negotiating team of the NCSROF was unknown barely a few hours before the negotiations started, evidencing the opposition's great internal division, which not only obstructs the current negotiating process, but that, probably, also hindered its military victory in the regime's most critical moments. Even in these extremely decisive moments, its mere participation in the round has created serious tensions with the Syrian National Council (NSC) in the Coalition's core.

Secondly, the surprise of withdrawing Iran's invitation, despite that up to 39 countries were invited by the UN, who withdrew this offer to Teheran's regime just before the talks started. Apart from the demand of the opposing side, this action might also correspond with the pressure of the United States on the Secretary-General of the UN, in its difficult balance to slowly get closer to Iran without simultaneously leaving Israel and Saudi Arabia behind, who are strange travel companions in this complicated exercise of diplomacy by Obama's administration.

But, leaving the causes aside, truth is that it is very difficult to obtain tangible results in a negotiation without Iran's presence, an essential actor in the Syrian conflict as one of the main advocates for the government's side. We can expect that this difficulty will be solved in future episodes, and it would increase the possibilities of carrying out significant progress. The presence of countries invited by the UN, like Australia and South Korea, who without a doubt have a commitment with peace and international stability, but are regionally very far away from the conflict, and Iran's absence, main actor, belittle coherence in the real possibility of reaching agreements.

Lastly, and in this case, very logically, the absence of a very important part, especially in the military area, of the opposition regime, constituted by a myriad of groups and small radical Islamic groups and jihadists, assure the non-recognition of the agreements, declarations or any other consequence of this and the following negotiation rounds.

The highly important presence of these combatants assures that, in spite of the great difficulty demonstrated by each side to advance in the negotiation process, it will probably be even more complicated to impose the fulfilment of the agreement to the before mentioned Islamic and jihadist militia when it occurs.

GENEVEA II DEVELOPMENT

Concerning the mere development of the meetings we can establish a clear parallelism with many other similar occasions of contemporary history. Two sides that have barely just accepted to meet face to face, with closed opinions, which basically consist in the fixed defence of their initial postulates, indifferent to the contrary's arguments. Also in this case, with the added theatrical resignation to converse directly and only do it through the mediator Brahimi.

The mentioned positions basically consist, on the Syrian regime's side on insisting to categorize all opposing groups as terrorists. An easy and stale resource very often used by non-democratic regimes in an effort to delegitimize the political and armed opposition. Furthermore, with this attitude, the regime enters a manifest incoherence by accepting to negotiate with those they categorize as terrorists or that sympathise with terrorism, while in their territory and their side they fight militia of organizations considered as terrorists in the international scene, like Hizbolá.

Therefore, it is an initial position of strength consistent with the advantageous military position that the regime and its allies have at this moment, but that has in their midst the clear distinction between opposition and authentic terrorists, not present in the negotiations, but that will have to accommodate in the following rounds if Al Assad really wants to reach concrete agreements with the opposition.

On NCSROF's side, the initial position is to disassemble the terrorist speech of the regime, as well as the demand of Al Assad's resignation and his impossible political survival in the transition process that is glimpsed at the end of the conflict with the explicit support of the Secretary of State, Kerry. This position seems more like the final objective mentioned in the

political process desired by the opposition instead of a starting point, but in a similar way to the closed attitude of the regime, it initially blocks any advance for negotiation.

Consequently, and in a very tense environment, as was to be expected, up to the point where the mediator has highlighted the acceptable behaviour of both sides, the first serious round in the roadmap that could end with the war in Syria has passed.

The minute of silence for the victims held by both delegations together with the rest of those present, was the only visible point in common expressed during the Geneva II talks.

RESULTS OF THE NEGOTIATION ROUND

There are no tangible results. Not even the simplest agreement on humanitarian help for besieged populations or with serious shortages has been possible, which only strengthens the view of those in each side that think that only a military solution can stop the war. However, we cannot talk about failure, at least from a concrete point of view, difficult to quantify, but that may be decisive in the months ahead.

Obviously, the countries that promote the negotiation rounds and the United Nations had as a minimum inexcusable objective to start the process that would lead to peace. Sit each fighting side and start walking the slow path towards truce and agreement. Certainly a modest, but achievable objective as it has been proven.

Consequently, leaving Geneva II with an open process that will soon continue this February – on the 10th – is already a victory in comparison to the situation prior to the talks. But it is also true that, in case of not seeing any progress in the following meetings, as limited as they may be; the simple act of dialogue cannot be an objective in an undefined way.

We must especially take into account that both parts, by the fact of attending Geneva II, accept the basic line established in Geneva I, which is no other than the creation of a transitional government that would lead to national reconciliation and the creation a constitution. Even the regime of Teheran has expressed their understanding and support of this objective. From this common basis, considering others as terrorists, the solution to the presence of various foreign jihadists on Syrian grounds, the composition of the mentioned government, with or without the presence of certain personalities, etc, will certainly be

elements subject of tough and slow negotiations, but will probably be solved through an agreement.

Controlling the military help to both sides by their supporters can be a definite tool to renounce the possibility of military victory by any of them, and consequently, a powerful incentive for a more positive attitude in future negotiations.

Meanwhile, we can find ourselves closer to adopting agreed measures that lead to easing the situation of numerous groups of the civil population, trapped because of the battles and in a very difficult situation. Measures like partial located truces that will allow the exit of people from specific locations, the entry of medical staff and equipment or food, etc.

These palliative measures can be a reasonable objective for the following meetings, from which we can build a more favourable climate for more politically themed decisions. It was very difficult to achieve a spectacular result in this negotiation round, taking into account the degree of whim on each side since the war started, but despite that, maybe Geneva II has laid the foundations to end the conflict, although it is still far away.

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