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Geneva II – Washington’s Plan B for Regime Change in Syria

Finian CUNNINGHAM

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The fatal problem with the Geneva II negotiations on Syria, due to open next week in Switzerland, is that the process is furtively being treated by the US and its allies as a lever for regime change. It is their Plan B for regime change, where Plan A is the failed covert military tactic. That does not bode well for a successful, that is sustainable, settlement to a crisis that is nearly three years old with well over 100,000 deaths and nine million people – more than a third of the total population – displaced from their homes. It amounts to an illegal interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, and as such is doomed to fail.

Of course, Washington and its allies would never admit to this cynicism. No, they couch their baleful, cynical agenda with all sorts of pious platitudes about «peace» and «finding solutions».

But one quick integrity-check is this: there are some 30 countries invited to attend the Geneva conference, including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and even Brazil and South Africa. But missing from that list like a hole in the head is Syria’s main regional ally, Iran. This omission is due to the insistence of the United States. Such an unreasonable, obstreperous American attitude betrays a hidden ideological objective and belies any genuine interest in finding a peaceful settlement.

Underscoring the ulterior motive is the seeming American concession that Iran is «welcome» to attend the Geneva II summit – but only if Tehran accepts that the Syrian government of Bashar

al-Assad must step down. Iran has refused to accept any such precondition for its participation and has reiterated that it is up to the Syrian people to decide on the political outcome of the talks.

The implicit flaw in the Geneva II process reflects the disingenuous position of the Western powers and their regional Arab and Turk allies towards trying to find a negotiated political settlement to the Syrian conflict.

Syria's Assad government has announced its willingness to participate in the conference, which opens on January 22 in the Swiss city of Montreux and continues in Geneva on January 24. It is called Geneva II because a previous conference held in Geneva at the end of June 2012 first set out a framework of constituting a «transitional government». The so-called Geneva I Communiqué clearly states that any political settlement must be mutually worked between Syrian parties and that it may comprise members of the present Syrian government, including Bashar al-Assad. In other words, the communiqué does not pre-empt negotiations.

Why the follow-up Geneva II conference has been delayed for more than 18 months is largely due to prevarication by the Western governments and their sponsored exiled Syrian opposition, the so-called Syrian National Council. The Western powers and their regional proxies have been busily trying to reinterpret the Geneva Communiqué as a statement that imposes the precondition of the Assad government standing down. For Syria and its allies Russia, China and Iran that contravenes the agreed Geneva principle of mutual negotiations and having no preconditions, especially preconditions imposed by foreign parties. (Truth be told, this would not be the first time that the US backtracks on political agreements, as Russia well knows from vacillating negotiations over nuclear arms reduction.)

US backsliding over Syria was clear immediately following the first Geneva conference when then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sardonically disclosed the ulterior agenda. In a quip to media, Clinton remarked that the continuance of Assad in power would «never be mutually acceptable» and therefore the communiqué, in the US view, was for all intents and purposes a sacking order.

A lot has changed over the intervening year and half. For a start, the death toll from the violence has probably doubled to the current figure of 130,000. The US and its allies bear responsibility for this bloodshed and destruction from their material support of the various anti-government militias and from their inordinate delay in convening the Geneva II conference.

A second major change is that Syrian government forces have managed to gain the military upper hand over the foreign-backed militants. Assad's army has retaken large swathes of the country and has pushed back the insurgents into territorial pockets of the northeastern region. The militants may still hold Syria's second city of Aleppo in the north and Raqqa in the northeast, but the Syrian Arab Army has been gradually whittling away control of surrounding areas into an ever-tightening noose.

Whereas back in June 2012 Assad's political future seemed to be in the balance, now his government is more assured that it will overcome the insurgency. Its legitimacy, mandate and

sovereignty have been reinforced. This insurgency has always been an externally driven covert campaign for regime change, underpinned by clandestine supply of arms, money and so-called jihadist fighters being funneled into Syria from the US, Britain and France in liaison with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan and Israel.

Moscow has been well aware of this covert agenda and hence it has stood firm in support of its historic Syrian ally, despite Western governments and media trying to traduce Russia's principled involvement as «providing succor to a despotic regime».

The Saudis appear to be the only member of the US-led axis that still retains a commitment to the covert military agenda for regime change. Washington and its other allies have sobered up to the realpolitik that regime change in Syria is not going to happen through the battlefield and wanton acts of terrorism.

That's why Clinton's successor, John Kerry, told the so-called Friends of Syria gathering in Paris last weekend that «there is no military solution, only a political one». The proper way to perceive Kerry's reasoning is not one of moral exhortation, but more a jaundiced resignation to reality by the US.

What Kerry means by «solution» is that the long sought-after objective of regime change in Syria must henceforth be achieved through political means because, quite evidently, the covert military option is quickly becoming redundant.

The Western media myth of «moderate rebels» fighting for democracy in parallel with anti-government «extremists» has collapsed spectacularly to reveal an orgy of heinous violations against civilians and nihilistic feuding between different extremist groups, all of whom profess a ideological link to Al Qaeda.

In the latest infighting between the extremists in Syria's northeast, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is reported to have executed hundreds of cadres belonging to the Jabhat al Nusra Front and another militia called Ahrar al-Sham. All of these groups – which were formerly fighting against the Assad forces before turning their guns on each other – espouse the fanatical Wahhabi ideology of Saudi Arabia and are supported materially by the Saudis. It has been reliably reported over several months – albeit in a low-key way – by the New York Times, Daily Telegraph and Le Monde among other Western media outlets that the US has supplied weapons to these Al Qaeda-affiliated groups with Saudi collusion.

From the Western viewpoint, the covert military agenda in Syria has degenerated from a smart regime-change tactic into dangerous, unpredictable loose cannon. The violent repercussions threatening the stability of Iraq, Lebanon and the region, extending as far as Russia as the Volgograd bombing atrocity indicates, is probably not what Washington foresaw being unleashed in such an uncontrollable way.

Revealing American apprehension, Kerry said last week: «This is part of the reason why the Geneva conference is so critical, because the rise of these terrorists in the region and particularly in Syria and through the fighting in Syria is part of what is unleashing this instability in the rest

of the region. That's why everybody has a stake. All of the [Persian] Gulf states, all of the regional actors, Russia, the United States and a lot of players elsewhere in the world have a stake in pushing back against violent extremist terrorists who respect no law, who have no goal other than to take over power and disrupt lives by force.»

Kerry's sanctimonious words are, of course, contemptible. Why is Iran pointedly omitted from this panoply of players? What's more, the extremism raging in the region – the countless bloody death toll – is a direct result of American imperialist machinations fomenting these very same «violent extremist terrorists who respect no law».

Kerry's words and his government's belated concern to convene the Geneva II conference are doubly contemptible because they are nothing more than barefaced deception to salvage a morass of its making.

Washington's concern is not to find a political settlement to end the Syrian conflict, but rather to find an alternative way of executing regime change by other means. This is why Washington is desperately trying this week to get its sponsored exile group the Syrian National Council (SNC) to attend the conference. The SNC has minimal political base inside Syria. Even the anti-government militants, whom the SNC presumes to sort-of represent, have rejected it as a political non-entity.

Nevertheless, the US needs this exiled confected group to attend the Geneva II conference in order to give its «Assad must go» precondition any substance. If the SNC does not attend then all that remains of the Syrian caucus at Geneva is the Assad government and reformist Syrian opposition parties, such as the Syrian Nationalist Party and the Syrian Popular Front for Change and Liberation. The latter opposition groups have said that they are willing to work out a negotiated settlement with the Assad government and, in scathing reference to the Western-backed SNC, they have rejected «a fabricated opposition which lives in fancy hotels and make their money through the blood of Syrian people».

That is the point: the US and its Western allies and their regional proxies, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, do not want to allow a genuine political process worked out by the Syrian people. The Orwellian-named Friends of Syria are imposing preconditions to orchestrate their pre-emptive regime-change outcome of Geneva II regardless of the interests or the sovereign rights of the Syrian people.

By contrast, Russia, China and Iran have shown themselves to be genuine allies of the Syrian people because these powers have insisted that the process must be governed by Syrians without any preconditions. As Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointed out, the Western approach to Geneva II is «ideological», not a practical commitment that prioritises finding a peaceful solution.

If Western interests are allowed to dominate the process, then the Geneva II is doomed to fail in its ostensible objective of achieving a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict... This should be no surprise because the authors of the conflict in Syria are the US-led axis, who now present themselves as the authors of peace. How can these actors possibly prescribe peace? And

moreover especially because their covert war on Syria is merely being redeployed by other, political, means.