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Syria Conflict: Battle Continues, Peace Talks Stalled

Dmitry MININ

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The UN envoy for Syria has announced a «temporary pause» in peace talks in Geneva saying that the process will resume later this month. Speaking to reporters after a meeting with opposition leaders, Staffan de Mistura, UN special envoy for Syria, insisted «*this is not the end, and it is not the failure of the talks*». De Mistura said both sides were «*interested in having the political process started*», and that he had set a new date of February 25 for the resumption of the talks.

The events unfolding in Geneva demonstrate that the forces opposing the legitimate government of Syria based in Damascus go to any length in order to stymie the negotiation process. The Saudi Arabia-formed delegation of «irreconcilable» Islamic opposition is adamant in its desire to

insist on the implementation of its preliminary conditions, one of which is for the regular Syrian military to suspend combat activities without any commitments on the other part. Turkey continues to commit provocative acts near the Syrian border in the air and on the ground.

«We are here for a few days. Just to be clear, only a few days. If there (is) no progress on the ground, we are leaving... We are not here for negotiations, we are here to test the regime's intentions», Monzer Makhous, an official from the Syrian pro-Saudi opposition's High Negotiations Committee, told Reuters Television on arrival to Geneva.

Opposition delegates in Geneva had a two-hour meeting with the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura, who said this session marked the official beginning of peace talks. At first glance, the High Negotiations Committee's negative attitude towards the talks appears to run contrary to logic. The government forces have advanced on the ground. Under the conditions, a truce would serve the interests of the Committee. The opposition realizes it has no chances of winning neither on the battlefield, nor at the round table. There is a general agreement that the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's only official branch in the Syrian conflict) must be excluded from the truce. Putting an end to hostilities can abruptly change the general balance of forces in the country. A ceasefire under international control in the western and central parts of Syria would enable the Syrian government to redeploy forces to the east and ramp up the effort against the Islamic State. Syrian regular military supported by the Russian Aerospace Forces will inevitably defeat Islamists and seize control of at least three fourths of the country's territory with 80 percent of its population. It will also exercise control over the country's natural resources, including oil and gas. As a result, Syrian government's clout will significantly grow and boost its role in the process of shaping the post-war Syria. This is something the Syrian opposition sponsored by Saudi Arabia would like to prevent from happening. They believe that the only way to prevent this scenario would be by inciting an intervention by the West, Turkey and Arab monarchies. To do that, Damascus must be made responsible for derangement of the peace management process. Even before the Geneva round of talks, some members of the High Negotiations Committee, including the chief negotiator Mohammed Alloush, issued a statement on January 23, saying that they hold the Syrian government and Russia responsible for any failure of peace talks and efforts to end the country's civil war.

Some world media outlets and Western politicians, like British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, raised a ballyhoo over a major offensive launched by the Syrian government troops in the province of Aleppo on the first day of the peace conference. They say the offensive undermines the peace management process, though the combat actions are mainly waged on the territory occupied by the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. The Syrian Free Army, known as a «moderate» force, sent reinforcements to these groups, which have been officially designated as terrorist organizations. The agenda of the peace conference on Syria must include the common mission of eradicating the Islamic State group and other jihadists. Otherwise the peace management will result in their exculpation.

Dr Bashar al-Jaafari, the head of the delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Syrian-Syrian talks in Geneva, said on January 31 that the Riyadh-supported delegation's delayed attendance at Geneva, and the fact that the names of its members are unknown, show that the pro-Saudi opposition lacks seriousness and responsibility. He condemned the terrorist bombings that

targeted Sayed Zainab area in Damascus countryside, a terror act that had taken place on the same day, noting that a terrorist from the so-called «southern front» promised to back the Riyadh delegation with military operations on the ground.

The Islamic State lost no time to claim the responsibility for the crime (it willingly takes responsibility for actually all such crimes in the world), but there are many indicators that prove that the version of events put forward by Bashar al-Jaafari is appropriately justified. According to him, it made no sense to make Saudi Arabia responsible for preparing the list of opposition invitees. This decision was at the core of many problems related to the talks. Saudi Arabia is not a neutral party in the Syrian conflict. Al-Jaafari also drew attention to the behavior of another terrorism sponsoring state – Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has arrested several officers, security personnel, prosecutors, and two journalists and accused them of treason for leaking secret information about the trucks carrying weapons sent by Turkey to terrorists in Syria.

The leading Kurdish movements – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) led by Salih Muslim Muhammad and its People's Protection Units or People's Defense Units (YPG) – are not made parties to the talks. It reduces the chances for success of the conference. These organizations have joined together with the government forces to fight the Islamic State. PYD controls a big chunk of territory in the north of the country. Moscow and Damascus have come in support of PYD and YPG participation. They said it was important for the outcome of the talks. Turkey and the Riyadh-controlled High Negotiations Committee fiercely opposed the idea.

Even Washington said it would serve the purpose to invite them. The United States strives for special relationship with the Kurds by supporting them with weapons supplies and sending military instructors. At that, the US did not emphasize the need to protect the Kurds' rights while preparing the Geneva conference. Its main efforts were focused on excluding Jaysh al-Islam (the Islam Army) and Ahrār ash-Shām (the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant) from the list of terrorist organizations (something Moscow insisted on) and making them part of the opposition delegation. Jaysh al-Islam (Islam Army) is viewed as a terrorist group by Russia.

According to *Al-Monitor*, there is hard evidence received from different sources to prove that the above mentioned groups have interacted with Jabhat al-Nusra.

The Kurds realize that if the United States wished, they would get the representation at the Geneva talks without great difficulties to overcome. Now PYD leaders start to suspect that the US simply plans to use the Kurds as cannon fodder.



Saleh Muslim, co-chair of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), said «*Their mentality is the same as the Nusra Front and Daesh (Islamic State)*», he said of Jaysh al-Islam. «They clearly want to establish an Islamic state».

According to him, the talks are doomed to failure without the PYD – the party he leads.

Sooner or later, any war will come to an end. There is no alternative to peace settlement of the Syrian conflict. Not the Geneva proceedings, but rather the events in Syria define the final outcome. Damascus is becoming more confident and self-assured, while the opposition continues its attempts to torpedo the peace talks. By doing so, it risks losing all the support it has inside the country. By obstructing the talks to make them delayed till late February the Saudi-sponsored opposition shot itself in the foot.