The Peace Talks on the Syrian Conflict
Main developments and differences between the Vienna (2015) and Geneva III (2016) meetings

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- The Vienna and Geneva III peace talks were the latest multilateral efforts seeking a resolution for the Syrian conflict. These peace talks involved important domestic and regional actors that, until then, had not participated together of previous negotiations.

- The role of Bashar al-Assad during and after the political transition in Syria is one of the key elements for solving the conflict.

- The main obstacles for the peace talks are the conflicting interests of the countries and local groups involved and the fact that important opposition groups did not take part in the negotiations.

Presentation

On April 18 2016, the Syrian opposition against the government suspended its formal participation on the peace talks for the Syrian conflict for indefinite term. The peace talks had been taking place in Geneva since the beginning of the year, facilitated by the United Nations (UN). Opposition’s spokespeople argued that their withdrawal from the negotiations was due to the violations of the cease-fire established in February 27. United States president, Barack Obama, as well as Russian Federation president, Vladimir Putin, expressed concern and stated the importance of respecting the cease-fire and continuing the peace talks (Martin 2016; Stratfor 2016).

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In 2011, the Middle East was hit by a series of mass protests that came to be known as the Arab Spring and set a significant change in the geopolitics of the region. Pro-democracy manifestations claiming, mostly, for socioeconomic development erupted in several countries, and eventually reached Syria. Bashar al-Assad regime responded with violence, causing the beginning of a conflict that lasts up to the present (Rodgers et al. 2016).

The protests in Syria became a civil war that already victimized over 250 thousand people, besides provoking the major refugee crisis since the Second World War - roughly 4.8 million Syrians are refugees and 6.5 million are internally displaced (Hudson 2016; Amnesty International 2015). The conflict broadened marked by foreign interference, which ended up opposing two regional powers and its respective allies: on one side, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and on the other, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the monarchies of the Gulf, supported by Israel, Turkey and the United States (Matthiesen 2015; Roberto 2015).

While the conflict endured, many peace talks took place trying to solve the Syrian situation. The last peace talks began in October 2015 in Vienna, and they were followed by the Geneva III peace talks of 2016. In Geneva III, the negotiations entered a new phase, which had the main difference of including representatives of the Syrian opposition and of Bashar al-Assad’s government.

But in what these peace talks really consist? Why were they considered so innovative and promising by most part of scholars? And how can the withdrawal of the Syrian opposition from the peace talks impact the upcoming of events in Syria, where the situation seems increasingly harder to solve?

Grasping the importance of such questions, this paper seeks to: i) understand the importance of the Syrian conflict through the analysis of the latest peace talks; ii) explore the diverse and divergent interests related to the resolution of the Syrian Civil War and how the involved actors act on the peace talks in order to achieve their interests; iii) understand why the 2016 peace talks were significantly different from the former efforts to solve the conflict; and iv) analyze the possible consequences that could come from these peace talks and how the opposition’s withdrawal may affect them.

This paper is based on certain premises. Firstly, that the Geneva III peace talks have its roots in the Vienna peace talks of 2015, and secondly, that they are significantly different from the previous efforts towards resolution of the Syrian conflict, since many parties with divergent interests were involved at the same time.

Despite that, we also assume that the effectiveness of the peace talks could be reduced due to the exclusion of the Syrian Kurds from the negotiations. Finally, the respect of a ceasefire is seen as fundamental for the success of future talks, and the withdrawal of the opposition group due to the violation of the established ceasefire might lead the peace talks to an end for indefinite time.
The Syrian Peace Process

Since 2011, many plans and agreements were elaborated in order to end the Syrian conflict, and the ensemble of these initiatives is often referred to as the Syrian peace process.

In 2012, the United Nations, supported by the Security Council’s permanent members - United States, Russia, France, United Kingdom and China -, headed the Geneva I Conference on Syria. The conference ended up with the production of a communiqué that detailed the necessary elements to resolve the political conflict in Syria. The document, however, failed to identify the parties that should be included in a prospective transitional government, since there are numerous opposition movements that carry different beliefs and motivations (Groarke 2016; United Nations 2012).

In 2014, the UN held the Geneva II Conference on Syria, where it tried to take both the government of Bashar al-Assad and some of the most prominent opposition groups (the Syrian National Coalition) together to the negotiating table. It was a clear attempt to achieve peace through an agreed division of power. Yet, these negotiations did not have practical effects, for both domestic and international reasons. Domestically, Assad ignored the recommendations to incorporate the opposition in the government, whereas internationally, the neighboring countries and some other great powers as well - except for Iran and Russia - seemed to have less and less disposition to negotiate with the Syrian president (Groarke 2016).

With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, the concern to fight it was added to the other worries related to political transition in Syria, leading to an intensification of the debates about the conflict. In 2015, after the beginning of the Russian direct involvement in Syria in September, the efforts to resolve the conflict apparently reached a higher level, carrying great differences from the initiatives aforementioned. Thus, this analysis will focus in the Vienna process, which began in October 2015, and the consequent Geneva Peace Conference (or Geneva III), which began in February 2016.

The Syria peace talks in Vienna (2015)

On September 30 2015, Russia carried out attacks in Syria, alleging that all its targets belonged to the Islamic State. Some Western Countries, especially the United States, questioned this allegation, accusing Russia, a traditional Assad ally, of inflicting attacks against the Syrian opposition. Regardless of the controversies regarding Russian targets, it is important to stress that this intervention significantly changed the balance of power in the conflict. It happened in a moment when the government forces were progressively losing control of the majority of Syrian territory. With a larger engagement from Russia, a great power with considerable political and military capabilities, it became clear that not only Moscow would
have prominence in the upcoming resolutions on the Syrian conflict, but also that it would do it standing up for Assad.

On October 23rd, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, met in Vienna and defined that the next peace talks on Syria should gather all parties involved in the conflict. That was a very important definition considering that the latter peace talks had only represented the interests of the United States, Europe and its Middle Eastern allies, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia - and all of them wanted Assad’s resignation as a precondition to reach peace. Kerry declared that he was willing to accept any partnership to defeat the Islamic State, which meant that Lavrov had probably achieved one of Russia’s main goals: the Western consent to give Iran, one of Assad’s major allies, a seat in the negotiating table (Mohammed and Murphy 2016).

This supposition was confirmed on October 30, when the first round of meetings held in Vienna took place. The key participants were U.S., Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, countries with essentially different visions regarding the future of Assad and the treatment of opposition groups, especially the Kurds. It was the first time that Iran and Saudi Arabia met in a negotiating table. Despite this change, it is important to stress that no Syrian representative was invited to participate. Besides the five countries aforementioned, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, China, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, United Arab Emirates and representatives of the European Union and the United Nations were also present. UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, stated that the watchword of the meetings in Vienna should be “flexibility”, since the participant countries supported different groups in Syria (Jung 2015).

At the end of the meetings held on the 30th, the countries had agreed that the resolution of the Syrian conflict should be diplomatic, respecting the people and the integrity of Syria, and that the Islamic State should be defeated. The UN was invited to mediate talks between the government and the Syrian opposition in order to guarantee the success of a political transition plan, but there was no definition of which opposition groups would be invited. Thus, it was established that the participating countries would meet again in two weeks to resolve conflicting points and build a joint agreement (European Union 2015; The Economist 2015).

The leadership assumed by Russia in the peace talks as the main broker between Western powers and the Syrian government must be highlighted, since it breached Russian diplomatic isolation. This isolation was imposed by the international community since the annexation of Crimea and the following suspension of G8. With the September intervention in Syria and the subsequent demonstration of its military forces, Moscow acquired a renewed international respect, despite its support for the Assad regime (Waterfield, Dominiczak and Blair 2016; Chatham House 2016). From that moment on, it became clear that the resolution of the
Syrian civil war could not be decided unilaterally by Western countries, like as the disastrous intervention in Libya. On the contrary, it would require a dialogue among all parties involved, including Russia and Iran, the supporters of Bashar al-Assad (Mohammed and Murphy 2015; Lynch and Hudson 2015).

The inclusion of Iran in the negotiating table also deserves special attention, since it ended the diplomatic isolation of the country in the Middle East and demonstrated its rise as an important power in the region. It was also an almost immediate result of the increased Russian military presence in Syria, as Moscow started to demand the Iranian presence in the peace talks despite objection from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies. However, it is necessary to stress that this inclusion may also have been heavily influenced by the rapprochement between the United States and Iran after the nuclear agreements of June 2015, which signaled Washington’s willingness to ease historical tensions in benefit of the Syrian peace talks. This move raised criticism and doubt from Saudi Arabia and Israel, the main U.S. allies in the region. Saudi Arabia is Iran’s traditional rival in the region, particularly due to disputes for influence in other Islamic countries - a rivalry that fits into the wider polarization between Shites and Sunnis (Nasr 2016). Turkey, in turn, had a position in accordance with Saudi Arabia regarding this rapprochement with Tehran, because of the fear of seeing Turkish interests threatened in the region (Tastekin 2016).

On November 14, the second round of negotiations took place in Vienna, with the participation of the same countries and organizations present on October 30, plus the representation of the Arab League. The group became known as the “International Support Group for Syria” (ISSG). On this occasion, the countries talked about the urgency to end the destruction of Syrian infrastructure as well as to mitigate the suffering of the Syrian people. They all agreed that the establishment of a cease-fire in the country should be the immediate priority, and that it would not include, however, attacks against the Islamic State or the al-Nusra Front. The countries pledged to support a political transition process in conformity with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, seeking for an inclusive, non-sectarian and Syrian-led governance (United Nations 2015).

Finally, it was also decided that elections focusing on the draft of a new constitution would be held within 18 months in Syria, and that January 1 would be the deadline for the beginning of peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups. The ISSG did not set beforehand which would be the opposition groups accepted in the negotiations, delegating the task of organizing them into a cohesive group to the UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura. Nevertheless, the countries emphasized being receptive to a group that contained the broadest possible spectrum of opposition groups. The participant groups should be chosen by the Syrian people, and they would have to define who would be their representatives and what would
be their goals in future negotiations. Both sides of the conflict, opposition and government, should find some common ground to draft the new constitution, since the ISSG found that the political element was essential to the resolution of the Syrian crisis (United Nations 2015; Norman, 2015; United States Department of State 2016).

**The Geneva III peace talks (2016)**

On February 1, 2016, a month after the expected date, the Geneva peace talks on Syria - also referred to as Geneva III - began. Organized by the ISSG and mediated by the United Nations, these meetings had the establishment of a ceasefire as primordial goal. The following objectives would be the institution of a transition government in Syria with upcoming elections and the defeat of the Islamic State.

The first meeting was formed by the same participants of the Vienna meetings, but with the significant addition of representatives of the Syrian government and of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), a coalition formed by 34 opposition groups - one third of it representing armed factions -, led by Saudi Arabia and headed by Mohammed Alloush, from the Salafist group Jaysh al-Islam. The delay in the occurrence of this meeting - which was scheduled for January 1 - was given mainly by indecision on who would be the recognized Syrian opposition (Carnegie 2016). Besides, the HNC itself showed some reluctance in negotiating with the Damascus regime if it did not cease the airstrikes against the opposition groups, but ended up yielding to the international pressure to participate of the talks.

The question on whether some opposition groups are radical or moderate is a conflicting issue among all the parties involved. On the one hand, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other European countries believe that the HNC is satisfactorily representative of the opposition; on the other, Russia, Iran and Assad’s government classify some of the groups of the HNC as radical or terrorists, due to the attacks they conduct against the government’s positions. Despite the lack of consensus regarding this issue, both sides of the conflict agreed with the
exclusion of some other groups from the peace talks, such as the Kurds, the jihadist militia Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (Zraick 2016). Regardless of the opinions of the international community on its composition, the 34 members of the HNC selected a delegation of 17 representatives to negotiate with the delegation from the Syrian government led by Bashar al-Jafaari, United Nations Permanent Representative on Syria (Pike 2016; Lund 2016).

The inclusion of representatives from Bashar al-Assad’s government in the peace talks reflect the changes that took place in the Syrian territory: since the beginning of the Russian airstrikes in support of Assad, the government recovered important regions of the country, such as Aleppo, the biggest city in Syria. Since then, the government promised to regain control over the entire country, which demonstrates its relatively strengthened position. This made it clear that Assad would not be ousted from power through force and that his participation in any negotiation had become essential - even if the majority of participants remained strongly opposed to his continuity as president of Syria (Irish and Strobel 2016; Dearden 2016).

The HNC representatives focused on humanitarian issues and on the release of political prisoners, while the Syrian government focused on defending Syria’s independence and territorial sovereignty, as well as the unity of the Syrian people. However, February was a period of stagnation in the peace talks, due especially to the military advances of the Syrian government and Russian forces against rebels in Aleppo. Therefore, the only issue really discussed was the need to establish a ceasefire. On February 22 the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Russia and the United States met at the 52nd Annual Conference on Security of Munich, and announced the adoption of the Terms for End of Hostilities in Syria47. The cessation of hostilities would begin on February 27 and would be accompanied by political talks between the parties involved. To succeed with the cessation of hostilities, a Task Force for the Ceasefire chaired by ISSG, United States and Russia was established (United States Department of State 2016). Yet, after the first 24 hours of the establishment of the ceasefire, the Russian and Syrian forces continued their attacks against a number of opposition groups in the northwest portion of the country. Even so, the ceasefire was responsible for a remarkable decrease in violence in the country, allowing the U.N. representative to move forward with his efforts to solve the conflict (Syrian Institute 2016).

A new round of negotiations began on March 14 and lasted until the 24th. According to the UN envoy, the talks at that time had reached a new level of

47 These terms included among other things: the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 - which was reiterated by Resolution 2268 of February 26th, 2016; the interruption of any form of attacks against the Syrian government forces or any group related to them; and immediate humanitarian aid (United States of America 2016).
urgency due to the announcement of the Russian withdrawal from Syrian territory (Arvinth 2016). Even in such context, Mistura drafted a statement of principles that should guide the conversations from that moment on. Those principles ranged from condemnation of terrorism to the establishment of a peaceful political transition in Syria. The statement, however, did not specify how the transition would occur nor what would be Assad’s role in this process (Wintour 2016).

On April 13, the peace talks got into a third round, in which it was expected that the necessary conditions for political transition in Syria would finally be defined (Wintour 2016). On the same day, parliamentary elections took place in the Syrian regions where Assad still had some control, and many people attended to support him. The opposition groups, taking into account the country’s instability and the government’s need to forge some support among the Syrian people, considered these elections illegitimate. In contrast, Russia declared that the elections were necessary due to the urge to avoid a power vacuum in the country, which could benefit the actions of armed groups (Davison and Bassam 2016).

On April 18, the HNC formally suspended its participation in the Geneva III peace talks. The group alleged having a number of reasons for doing so, the main one being the refusal of the Syrian government to allow humanitarian aid on its territory. According to the HNC, negotiations could not continue unless the Assad regime and its supporters, particularly the Russian forces, stopped bombing civilians and opponents, and accepted the formation of a new government in Damascus. Both the United Nations and the United States acknowledged that the withdrawal of the HNC had legitimate reasons, but positioned against it for considering that it would represent a setback in the talks (Hudson 2016).

Since then, both sides have mutually accused each other of violating the ceasefire established in late February. In an attempt to bring all the parties back to the negotiating table, the UN special envoy has been appealing to the United States and Russia (Hudson 2016). Despite all the efforts aforementioned concerning the inclusion of the Syrian government and of the opposition groups in the peace talks, it is important to pay special attention to the fact that the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which represents the Kurds in northern Syria, was excluded from any participation in the negotiations. The Kurdish participation in the Syrian Civil War is complex and of direct interest of

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48 On March 14th, Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised the other countries and groups involved in the Syrian conflict by announcing the partial withdrawal of Russian military forces from Syria. Air strikes against the opposition, however, continued. Thus, Russia achieved its goal to strengthen the government forces and establish its military presence in the country whenever necessary. Analysts believe that Vladimir Putin’s announcement sought to press President Bashar al-Assad to offer greater commitments to a peace agreement in Geneva III (Salih 2016).
the other powers involved in the conflict. The Kurdish forces are currently the main players in Syrian territory to combat the Islamic State, which has encouraged the United States to give them military and financial support. However, the existing ties between the PYD and the Kurdish rebel organizations in southeastern Turkey (especially the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK) led the Turkish government to oppose vehemently to any participation of Kurdish representatives in the Geneva peace talks. More than that, it affirmed it would leave the negotiations if the PYD was included (Perry and Mohammed 2016; DeYoung and Morello 2016).

This tense relationship between the Turks and the Syrian Kurds also motivated Ankara to impose offensive attacks in the bordering territories of Northern Syria, which are controlled by the Kurds (Reuters 2016). Thus, even if the Geneva III meetings succeed in elaborating an agreement between the Syrian government and the opposition, the absence of the Kurds in this resolution could undermine its real chances of effectiveness. After all, the PYD enjoys great popular support and has been constantly gaining more positions in northern Syria over time.

**Figure 1 - Areas of control by each group in Syria (January 2016)**

Source: Robbins 2016.

**Concluding Remarks**
The analysis of the latest peace talks on Syria certifies the importance and complexity of the Syrian conflict. This conflict has somehow been involving all Syria’s neighboring countries: Iraq, due to the actions of the Islamic State; Jordan and Lebanon, due to the refugee crisis; and Turkey, due to the influx of refugees but also to the Kurdish issue. Iran and Saudi Arabia, in turn, have particular and virtually opposite interests regarding the resolution of the war, and they finance and support distinct groups in the country in order to influence the regional balance of power. The European Union, the United States and Russia also take part in the conflict by maintaining relations with the government or with the opposition groups, and by doing direct military interventions to fight the Islamic State - or even, to support the Assad regime, as Russia has been doing. Acknowledging this diversity of interests, one can evaluate the peace talks as a moment when there was finally a consensus about at least one issue regarding the conflict Syria: that all the parties of the conflict should have a seat in the negotiating table due to the many ambitions at stake.

Despite this positive perspective, the absence of the Syrian Kurds in the negotiations could be a genuine obstacle to reach lasting peace in the country, given the large local and regional support that they enjoy. Ignoring them could encourage their armed branches to keep carrying out attacks, since they would not be included in the ceasefire agreements and consequently in the resolutions for political transition. Washington’s strategy in Syria, currently based in indirect support to the opposition groups in order to avoid wider involvement on the ground, is highly incoherent, since it ends up strengthening the Kurds on the ground at the same time that the U.S. agrees with the Kurdish absence at the peace talks.

The HNC withdrawal from the Geneva III peace talks can halt this multilateral effort to solve the Syrian war for indefinite term. The consequences can be negative to the region and particularly to the Syrian citizens, especially if the ceasefire is broken off. That could lead to an escalation of violence by the government and the the opposition groups in all the contested regions of the country. Even if the negotiations continue without the HNC - like the May 17 negotiations in Geneva, in which the Syrian opposition and the government did not take part -, it is highly unlikely that the HNC accepts any of the deliberations drafted unilaterally by the ISSG, thus retarding the political transition.

Some elements, however, can still be seen as positive legacies from Geneva III. Primarily, the American-Russian joint and balanced leadership is something new in the post-Cold War era, which was marked until now by U.S. prominence. The international balance of power has been changing since the Ukrainian crisis, revealing possibility of a new diplomatic trend marked by larger dialogue between these two great powers, without the preponderance of a single country and with the United
Nations as the arena for such negotiations.

Secondly and finally, the role played by Iran since the Vienna talks must be highlighted. Tehran’s inclusion in the negotiations was definitely a diplomatic victory for Russia and Iran, but it was also for the U.S., since it culminated in greater Iranian involvement in the fight against the Islamic State. The arrangement of countries in Vienna and Geneva III was different from the previous peace talks on Syria, which were led mainly by U.S. key allies in the region, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Iran’s traditional opponents. The Iranian presence in support of Assad’s government represented the international recognition that a peaceful solution for Syria would only be viable if Iran played a more significant role. The increased importance of Tehran could then bring Bashar al-Assad to the negotiating table. Iran, in turn, succeeded in maintaining its influence on Syria and hindering, at least for now, any U.S.-led unilateral outcome for the peace talks.

All those elements, in addition to the ending of the economic sanctions against Iran, may be setting the ground for a new balance of power in the Middle East. This new balance may delegate greater responsibility to Iran in maintaining the stability in the region, and enable new dynamics among regional powers, as well as between them and the international great powers, such as the United States and Russia.
References


