

SYRIA: FREE SYRIAN ARMY SET CONDITIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN GENEVA II PEACE TALKS

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On Monday, November 11th, 2013, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) set its conditions to participate to the Geneva II Middle East Peace Conference (hereinafter Geneva II), which is expected to take place by the end of the year. With all parties now declaring their willingness to take part to the Conference, several issues have still to be solved by *sherpas* before its beginning.

In a Monday night statement, the FSA's military command high council stated to welcome "any political solution (to the conflict) based on clear objectives"; the primary of which is the establishment of a transitional authority granted with full powers. Secondly, it called for an "agreement in principle on the abdication" of President Bashar al-Assad"; for a "specific timetable" for negotiations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter; for an "independent judiciary" in charged with bringing to justice those who committed crimes against the Syrian people; for the release of prisoners; for the end of the bombing campaign by the Syrian Army; for the "opening of humanitarian corridors" in the areas under the control of government forces; for foreign fighters from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon to leave the country. Finally, the statement called upon opposition forces to shrink ranks and create a single representative delegation made by both the FSA and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (hereinafter Syrian National Coalition - SNC)¹.

¹ The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, also known as Syrian National Coalition – SNC, is the main opposition organization established in Doha, Qatar, in

The FSA's statement comes only few hours after the SNC released its conditions after a second day of meeting in Istanbul. The SNC calls President Bashar al-Assad to step down and leave power to transitional government in which he will have no role. Similarly to the FSA, the SNC demanded to opening of humanitarian corridors and the release of prisoners, above all women and children. This was a remarkable change of stance with respect to last month's threats to boycott the conference unless al-Assad was removed from power, as announced in October by SNC President Ahmad al-Jarba.

The United States has welcomed the announcement by the SNC to take part to the Geneva II talks. The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, defined it as a "big step forward and an important one", while the US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Washington is particularly pleased about the decision to include representative of the Kurdish National Coalition. This will make the Coalition more inclusive with respect to Syria's diversity, Ms. Psaki said.

On the other side of the political divide, the Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi announced on Wednesday that the Syrian government will also participate to the Geneva II conference. Minister al-Zoubi stated that Syria is "open to all ideas" in order to reach a political solution to the crisis. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that government representatives will accept President al-Assad removal from power as a pre-condition for the peace talks.

Therefore, although "big steps forward" have been done by both parties, several issues remain to be addressed before the starting of the conference, which according to recent rumors, released by Syrian daily al-Watan, could start on December 12. However, there is no official confirmation on this regard.

Nevertheless, although all parties seem to agree now on the importance of the Geneva II talks as a mean to find a political solution, the pre-condition of al-Assad removal

November 2012. Its main task is to coordinate different opposition movements fighting against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. It is based in Cairo and since April 2013 it is presided by Ahmad al-Jarba. Since its inception, the SNC has been close to the position of the Muslim Brotherhood. For this reason, its authority has been challenged by Salafist groups like the al-Nusra Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and even by some radicalized members of the Free Syrian Army. For more information: BBC News, *Islamist rebels in Syria reject National Coalition*, 25 September 2013, retrieved on 14 November 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24239779>

remains a big obstacle that could lead to a further postponement. Therefore, international mediators (the United States, Russia and the United Nations) have to work hard to bring both government and opposition representatives to a common ground.

In the meantime, the conflict on the battlefield does not seem to slow down. On Wednesday, government forces have regained control over Damascus's southern suburb and fights to recapture Aleppo are still ongoing. International media reported this week that troops loyal to President al-Assad have entered Damascus's Hujaira suburb, hence cutting rebels' supply lines.

The perspective of the Geneva II conference in the near future should not change such narrative. Although a ceasefire could be arranged in correspondence with the talks, both rebels and government forces will be involved in harsh battles in order to gain as much territorial gains as possible to maximize their bargaining power before sitting on the negotiating table.

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