SPOT REPORT:

The Geneva III talks: The Syrian and international media conversation

In the last week of January 2016, the Geneva talks have garnered a large amount of attention on social media in both the pro-opposition and pro-regime camps. The talks were also discussed extensively in Syrian regime mouthpieces and in pro-regime Russian and Iranian media outlets. A selection of trends and articles is discussed below.

- **Syrians denying the need for talks:** Confident in their capabilities and wary of their opponents, many activists on both sides of the aisle argued that the solution to the Syrian conflict would be military, not political.

- **Opposition social media:** On the opposition side, activists responded very positively to the prominent role given to Islamist group Jaish al-Islam in the negotiating committee. They also lambasted other delegates perceived as regime allies and reacted angrily to statements attributed to US Secretary of State John Kerry.

- **Pro-regime social media:** Regime supporters expressed their confidence that the opposition would come into negotiations in a weak position.

- **Pro-regime mouthpieces:** Semi-official Syrian media outlets asserted that the regime would gain from the peace talks while the opposition would lose. They also accused Saudi Arabia and Turkey of delaying the negotiations, and said that the opposition delegation contains terrorist groups.

- **International media sympathetic to the Syrian regime (Russian, Iranian):** Allied media blamed the opposition for jeopardising the negotiations by failing to self-organise; rejected the opposition’s preconditions for negotiations, saying they were counterproductive; and echoed the official regime position that the opposition delegation contains representatives from terrorist groups. These outlets also chastised Saudi Arabia and Turkey for delaying the talks due to their positions on Iran and Kurdish groups respectively.

**Question:** “What do you think of the Geneva talks?”

**Answer:** “Is there bread??”

A cartoon circulated by opposition activists as part of the #Dont_go_to_Geneva hashtag campaign.
Pro-regime social media

Pro-regime pages generally took the stance that the negotiations would be a ‘catastrophe’ for Syria’s opposition. They circulated many analytical posts and statements by high-ranking American and Russian officials hinting at the weak position of the so-called opposition.

- One analytical post outlined the circumstances that led the opposition to be in such a weak state. It argued this resulted from a combination of (1) the highly coordinated Syrian-Russian military campaigns with support from other allies and (2) the confusion of international opposition supporters. The post concluded that “the final say goes to whoever has more power on the ground” and stated that the SAA’s steamrolling through Latakia countryside and Aleppo would highly impact the negotiations.
- Other posts deemed the talks pointless altogether. They argued that the only thing that can make any difference on the ground is firepower and soldiers. Commenters who responded to this post agreed with it, and many said that they are confident that the SAA is more than capable of achieving victory.
- A rumoured statement by US Secretary of State John Kerry was widely circulated on pro-regime social media. In it, Kerry allegedly informed the opposition that Assad would be eligible to run for the presidency again, and that it therefore falls to the opposition to try to compete against him in elections. Commenters mainly mocked the opposition and their lack of substance. Others made a link between the US’s abandonment of the opposition and recent SAA victories secured with Russia’s constant support.
- Other pages shared an image of a rocket launcher flying the Syrian flag. The caption for the image read “Geneva I, Geneva, II, Geneva III, Geneva etc…. The final word is for the Syrian Arab Army on the ground”. On various pages, this image received hundreds of likes.
Pro-opposition social media

In the last two weeks, activists and opposition pages discussed the long-awaited Geneva talks.

- The names of the negotiating team announced were largely received with applause, with many commenters stating that this delegation represents the people. They pointed in particular to the prominent role played by Jaish al-Islam, a large faction in Rural Damascus, as evidence of this fact (Mohammad Alloush, brother of the recently deceased commander of Jaish al-Islam, has been appointed chief negotiator for the Syrian opposition delegation). However, some questioned the capabilities of the chosen team for negotiating with the regime, asking what credentials or skills they have in that regard.

- Some commenters deemed that the entire negotiation process is futile. They said that the only solution will be on the ground, at the hands of the heroes fighting for Syria’s dignity and freedom.

- A wave of criticism erupted around some of the names rumoured to be put forward for the opposition delegation. These names included Saleh Moslem, head of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the political wing of the People’s Protection Units (PYD); Haytham Manna, the head of Kameh party and former chairman of the National Coordination Body, and more recently the head of the Syrian Democratic Forces; and Randa Kassis, president and founder of the Movement for a Pluralistic Society. Activists argued that these individuals do not represent the revolution because they have previously released comments seen as offensive to the revolution, and, in the case of Moslem, have supported regime hostilities against the armed opposition.

A post on the Facebook page of popular Al-Jazeera talk show host Faysal al-Qasim: "If Russia wants to impose the name of Manna on opposition delegation, it would be better to impose it on the regime delegation, as he is better placed to negotiate on behalf of the regime".

A post on the Facebook page of popular Al-Jazeera talk show host Faysal al-Qasim: "Let’s nominate Haytham Manna to be with the official Russian or Syrian [regime] delegation, as an adversary in the negotiations with the Syrian people".

- Some international stances and statements enraged activists and commenters on social media. These included the recent, rumoured (and denied) statement by US Secretary of State John Kerry that
“should the Syrian opposition refuse to go to negotiations, they would lose the support of their friends”, and the statements of the UN envoy Staffan De Mistura about a national unity government and his reserving the right to invite anyone he deems appropriate to join as part of the opposition delegation. These statements were seen as proof that Iranian and Russian agendas had materialised. Commenters found these statements extremely offensive and many, in response, called on the political opposition to refrain from going to Geneva.

A commenter on statements made by US Secretary of State John Kerry and UN envoy Staffan de Mistura, seen as detrimental to the opposition:

“We await a statement from the High Negotiating Committee clarifying its position on De Mistura’s words — they will either announce their decision to go to Geneva (submissively) or they will take the respectful and honourable stance, one that is worthy of a revolution and not this filthy authority-sharing project”.

- Activists launched a campaign to set some ground rules for the opposition delegation. The campaign focuses on the detainees, using the hashtag “My release before your negotiations” (تفاوضكم قبل #خروجي). The campaign demanded, through a set of photos and videos, that the negotiators call for the immediate release of detainees as part of the confidence-building measures before sitting down with the regime at the negotiation table.
- In a hashtag launched mid-week, many opposition activists firmly called on their political representatives to boycott the Geneva talks. The hashtag #Dont_go_to_Geneva attracted commentary on the humanitarian reasons for objecting to negotiations with the regime. Participants expressed anger about the violence perpetrated by Assad’s and allied forces and circulated satirical cartoons about the humanitarian situation.

Regime mouthpieces in Syria

Three trends stand out in coverage of the negotiations on the pro-regime side:

- Most pro-regime media outlets omitted any substantive discussion of the regime’s position on the peace talks. Rather, they were concerned with the opposition delegation’s stance on the peace talks.
- Pro-regime coverage in Iran and Lebanon underlined that Saudi-Iranian tensions were at the heart of delays in negotiations, but placed the blame on Saudi Arabia rather than Iran.
- Pro-regime coverage underlined the opposition delegation’s inclusion of terrorist groups, providing implicit sanction if the regime were to withdraw from the talks.

The negotiations story was spun as follows:

- The regime side is ready and open for the negotiations, and any delay is not from their side.
- The Assad regime will only gain from the peace talks, and the opposition will lose.
- The talks not only depend on the regime and the opposition, but also depend on the countries backing the two sides, namely the face-off between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the one hand, and the USA and Russia on the other.
- Saudi Arabia and Turkey are each throwing a spanner in the works and hindering the peace talks, because a political solution is not in their favour.
The opposition delegation includes terrorist groups such as Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham.

Russia and the US are on the same page in terms of countering ISIL.

Al-Watan

The daily newspaper al-Watan, owned by Rami Makhlouf, cousin of Bashar al-Assad, published an article on 25 January 2016, titled:

“As we come closer to the end of the month, Geneva 3 is at the stake, and Kerry hammers the heads of the supreme commission: You either go to the peace talks or else…”

- If the peace talks don’t take place, blame it on the opposition; The Syrian opposition is reluctant to join the peace negotiations, and US Secretary of State John Kerry is forcing them to do so, otherwise the US will renege on its support to the opposition.
- The purpose of the negotiations is to form a national unity government and not an interim government.
- Kerry: President Bashar Al-Assad has the right to run for presidency again in elections that will be held later on.
- The US will intervene in Syria only for the purpose of fighting terrorism, and not for any other reason.

What the US wants from Geneva is just the image, published on 25 January 2016

The article elucidates that the Syrian regime, backed by its allies, outweighs the opposition and will not be in a position of giving compromises, for the following reasons:

- Obama’s government wants to invest in the Geneva talks politically ahead of the upcoming elections, and promote it as an achievement by the current American president before he leaves office.
- The Moscow-Tehran-Damascus axis is advancing politically and on the ground against the Washington-Ankara-Riyadh-Doha axis.
- Turkey is extorting the European Union for more money in exchange for its help containing the refugee crisis.

All the roads to Geneva Are Blocked, published 21 January, lists four reasons standing in the way of the anticipated negotiations:

1. The opposition delegation includes terrorist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam.
2. The continuous postponing of the negotiations.
3. The exclusion of representatives from the Syrian opposition such as Qadri Jameel, Haitham Manna, and Salih Moslem.
4. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

SAMA and al-Watan

Sama TV, a pro-regime broadcast news channel, quoted Staffan de Mistura and Foreign Policy magazine as saying that Saudi Arabia is impeding the political solution in Syria by controlling “who’s in and who’s out” in the opposition delegation to Geneva.

DP News, an Arabic-language pro-regime agency, reported on Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s objections to including the YPG in among the opposition representatives, due to its being a terrorist group.
Pro-regime media in Iran and Russia

Iranian media

Al-Alam TV, the main Arabic-language Iranian media outlet, published on 21 January 2016 an article entitled:
*What did Lavrov say, and what was the opposition response?*

- The article accuses the opposition delegation headed by Riyad Hijab of being inflexible about who will represent the opposition, and of being Saudi-oriented (a “tool” of the Saudis).
- It indirectly absolved the Syrian regime of responsibility for any future withdrawal from the negotiations, as some of the opposition representatives are from terrorist groups.

The Arabic-language edition of *FARS News Agency*, the mouthpiece for the Iranian regime, reported that:

- The irresponsible decision by Saudi Arabia to sever relations with Iran would affect the Syrian peace talks.
- Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stated that Tehran is committed to the peace talks that will take place in Vienna and New York, and called upon the Saudis to play a positive role in the region by supporting the negotiations.

Russian media

Russian figures and Russian media also drew attention to the Geneva talks.

- The Russian envoy to the UN said that “while there have been many attempts by supporters of the Syrian opposition to hinder the peace talks, they all have been for naught”.
- The pro-government “Komsomol Truth” (Komsomolskaya Pravda) tabloid reported a phone call between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry. The article is noteworthy because it drew attention to an event that was hardly discussed in Western media, while spinning it to suggest that Kerry had taken tough stances on the Syrian opposition. According to the article, Kerry and Lavrov agreed on the need to form an opposition delegation that matches the requirements of the peace talks and the needed outcomes, such as fighting Daesh and all of the extremist armed groups.
- Vzglyad, an influential Russian paper, published an article entitled “Turkey threatens to hinder the negotiations in Geneva” reporting on Turkey’s self-stated refusal to take part in the peace talks if any Syrian-Kurdish actor was represented. In line with Russian coverage of the conflict, the article tacitly accused Turkey of obstructing progress by taking partisan stances.
- On Friday 29 January, the “Echo of Moscow” newspaper, considered a government mouthpiece, argued that the Syrian opposition delegation should agree to participate in the talks without imposing any preconditions. The newspaper carefully chose the words used to refer to these preconditions. Thus, it avoided mentions of barrel bombs, saying that the opposition should not demand “a cessation of hostilities” (rather than saying the opposition had called for “an end to barrel bombing”). Further, it justified the continuation of sieges in the lead-up to negotiations, saying that “terrorism must be stamped out if the negotiations are to be fruitful”.
- Another prominent Russian figure, Boris Dalkov, a member of the Arabic and Islamic Studies Centre in Moscow, said the peace talks were postponed for two main reasons: (1) disagreement among the sponsoring countries as to the status of armed groups – Syrian nationalists or terrorists, and (2) the unrelenting amendments being made on a daily basis to the opposition delegation list.

The Gazeta.Ru website published an article titled “The main obstacles in Geneva”. It cited four main obstacles to peace:

1. There is no predetermined beginning or ending for the talks, meaning there is not enough time to discuss solutions and vote on them.
2. There is no clear information on who is attending the talks on behalf of the opposition.

3. The divided Syrian opposition is effectively split between a pro-Russian/Iranian camp and another whose positions reflect those of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The author added that these positions are so widespread within the disorganised opposition that both stances, while in tension with one another, might be represented at the Geneva talks.

4. Russia wants Qadri Jameel and Saleh Moslem to be part of the talks, despite the likelihood that this may spark a political skirmish between Russia and Turkey. The newspaper explained that Turkey objects because Moslem represents the Kurdish opposition which is banned in Turkey, while Russia refuses the participation of Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam.