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## OPINION

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# The committee to save Syria

Geneva 2 requires inclusion of key parties, marginalization of extremists and a commitment to a democratic transition

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**Topics:** International (/topics/topic/categories/international.html), Syria (/topics/topic/international-location/middle-east/syria.html), War (/topics/topic/issue/war.html)

The Middle East is in a state of emergency. Syria is on the verge of total collapse, with catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Tens of thousands of Syrians have been killed by government and opposition forces, and more than 7 million civilians have become refugees, either internally displaced or outside their country. On Monday the United Nations announced that all parties involved in the conflict would come together for talks, dubbed the Geneva 2



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, left, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva in September 2013 after they met for talks on Syria's chemical weapons. Philippe Desmazes/AFP/Getty Images

(<http://www.euronews.com/tag/geneva/>) conference, to discuss a political solution, beginning Jan. 22. The efforts had been marred with delays, particularly owing to the United States' inability to persuade ([http://rbth.ru/international/2013/11/06/geneva\\_ii\\_postponed\\_until\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_year\\_31501.html](http://rbth.ru/international/2013/11/06/geneva_ii_postponed_until_the_end_of_the_year_31501.html))

Syrian opposition leaders to participate. It remains unclear which groups will represent the opposition and who will represent the government.

The first stumbling block to a political settlement has been the opposition of the U.S., its regional allies and the Syrian opposition to Iran's attendance at Geneva 2. "We have tried again to persuade them that Iran is an important participant of the process who plays a serious role in resolving the Syrian crisis and who can contribute positively and that it is therefore necessary to invite the country to the conference," said ([http://rbth.ru/international/2013/11/06/geneva\\_ii\\_postponed\\_until\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_year\\_31501.html](http://rbth.ru/international/2013/11/06/geneva_ii_postponed_until_the_end_of_the_year_31501.html)) Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Gennady Gatilov. On Monday when Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N.-Arab League envoy for Syria, was asked whether Iran would participate, he said, "We haven't established a list yet. (Iran and Saudi Arabia) will certainly be among the possible participants."

A second problem concerns demands for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's resignation. Syria's foreign-backed opposition coalition has been divided (<http://en.alalam.ir/news/1526961>) over taking part in Geneva 2, with 19 rebel groups refusing outright to be at the negotiating table unless (<http://rt.com/news/syria-opposition-refuse-geneva-804/>) Assad steps down, an unacceptable condition for Tehran, Moscow and Damascus. It is a difficult concession to secure, given that Assad has the upper hand ([http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MID-04-040913.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MID-04-040913.html)) in the conflict, with full control over the intelligence and security establishments.

A third complicating factor is the weakness of the Syrian opposition. The U.S., its European allies and its regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have invested heavily in the Syrian opposition but with limited returns. Marred by internal divisions, the opposition has neither credible representatives nor a leadership structure. In addition, the opposition lacks a broad-based vision of Syria's future post-Assad and is largely dependent on foreign tactical, financial and military support.

Western governments are concerned about the increasing presence of Salafi extremist elements in the opposition. The role being played by terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra in the civil war is especially worrisome. Some of these extremist groups, like ISIS ([http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-12/world/41335229\\_1\\_syria-islamic-state-foreign-fighters](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-12/world/41335229_1_syria-islamic-state-foreign-fighters)), seek the disintegration of Iraq and Syria — which would have major implications for the security and stability of the whole region. Now that terrorist groups have a strong foothold in Syria — the heart of the Middle East — they have the potential to branch out across Syria's borders to Turkey, Israel, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Syria's two-and-a-half-year sectarian and civil war has already spilled over into Iraq and Lebanon, killing hundreds of innocent civilians. An Al-Qaeda-linked group in Lebanon claimed responsibility for a dual blast at the Iranian Embassy (<http://world.time.com/2013/11/19/al-qaeda-group-in-lebanon-claims-responsibility-for-iran-embassy-bombing/>) in Beirut on Nov. 19 that killed 23 and injured 146 people, including an Iranian cultural attache.

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## peace. ”

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A fourth issue concerns military strikes. While U.S. allies (<http://www.cbsatlanta.com/story/23308288/obama-calls-for-congress-to-authorize-military-action>) in the region — Saudi Arabia in particular — are angry with the Obama administration's decision to pull back from attacking Syria and pursue direct talks with Iran, it is unlikely that Washington and its allies have the desire, let alone ability, to prosecute a new war in the Middle East, especially after costly failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. This legacy has propelled a better understanding among the U.S., the European Union, Russia, Iran and China to seek a political solution for the Syrian crisis.

A fifth problem is the different policy approaches by key players toward the Syrian conflict. Saudi Arabia altered its involvement after the U.S.'s decision not to attack. Riyadh has stepped up support (<http://eaworldview.com/2013/11/syria-analysis-can-saudi-arabia-form-national-insurgency/>) for radical groups in Syria and pursued an independent policy of advancing national insurgencies and distancing itself from the Supreme Military Council — the main Syrian armed opposition group, which has long been backed by the United States. Saudi Arabia seeks to weaken or defeat Assad's Alawite-Shia regime as a means to strike at Iran and reverse the majority-Shia takeover in Iraq and weaken Shia power in Lebanon. This policy risks Syria's disintegration and spillover to neighboring countries and the rest of the region. The Iranian approach in Syria, by contrast, is more moderate. Iran is not antagonizing Sunnis by calling them apostates and has repeatedly expressed (<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920503000713>) its opposition to any foreign interference in Syria's affairs. Instead, Tehran has recommended inclusive dialogue, national reconciliation and free elections for resolving the Syria crisis.

The composition and participation of key stakeholders in the Syrian conflict at the Geneva 2 peace talks is critical. Only a conference that includes all major parties in Syria, the region and the world can successfully clear the way for peace. The recent (<http://www.aawsat.net/2013/11/article55321470>) cooperation among the U.S., Russia and Iran to convince the Syrian government to relinquish its chemical weapons, sign the Chemical Weapons Convention and open the country to international inspectors was encouraging. So too are the recent Iran-U.S. negotiations, aimed not only at the Iranian nuclear file but also at regional issues like the crises in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

All parties should support U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's efforts. Geneva 2 talks could be productive if all concerned stakeholders, including Iran, Assad and opposition leaders, are included. The group should call for a genuine cease-fire backed by regional and international powers. Participants must agree on several further principles and goals. First, there must be concerted effort to prevent Syria's disintegration through measures that mitigate sectarian vengeance. Key government, military and security structures must be retained, while terrorist and extremist elements must be marginalized. All parties to the talks should back robust humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of civilians. The parties should also consider the establishment of a regional cooperation mechanism to address current and future security challenges. The Syrian conflict has polarized the country; to foster national unity, therefore, there is

a need for a forum for national dialogue. Finally, parties to the talks should support a new democracy by holding free and fair elections for the presidency, parliament and a committee to draw a new constitution — administered and supervised by the United Nations.

Geneva 2 offers the prospect of a political solution to the Syrian conflict. But if the talks fail, the Syrian conflict can escalate and spill over across the region. Parties to the talks have a responsibility not to allow that to happen.

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