

Special Representative to Syria to Brief on Stalled Political Process

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What's In Blue

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Tomorrow morning (13 March), UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi will brief Council members in consultations on the two rounds of Geneva II peace talks that were held in January and February and on whether a third round of talks is feasible. A draft press statement supporting the Geneva negotiation process, which had been shared with the P5 yesterday, was today circulated to the wider membership by France.

It has been nearly a year since Brahimi last briefed Council members. On 19 April 2013, he reported on efforts to facilitate a political solution to the Syrian conflict and reiterated his position that the situation in Syria required action by the Council. However, on 7 May 2013, Russia and the US announced they would bring the government and the opposition to the negotiating table, effectively sidelining the Council's voice on the political process. Since that announcement, Council members have avoided any contentious discussions of Geneva II so as to not upset the process, despite the significant delays in convening the talks.

Brahimi has met bilaterally with several Council members in the past few days, delivering a pessimistic message about the prospects for the Geneva process to deliver a tangible outcome. A similarly grim message is expected to be presented to the broader Council membership at tomorrow's briefing as well as to the General Assembly, which Brahimi is set to address on Friday (14 March).

The first round of UN-mediated Geneva II peace talks between government and opposition delegations was held from 22-31 January with no progress in agreeing to confidence-building measures, such as humanitarian access, local ceasefires or prisoner releases. Talks resumed from 10-13 February, focusing on forming a transitional governing body, ending violence and fighting terrorism. Brahimi insisted both parties declare their political will to deal with these issues in response to the impasse that emerged in the first round of talks over President Bashar al-Assad's future role. The government refused to discuss any political transition until there is a halt to terrorism. The opposition presented its roadmap for a political solution, but the government did not respond.

On 14 February, Brahimi convened a trilateral meeting with Russia and the US to bring fresh momentum to the process. However, the meeting was acrimonious and likely mirrored media remarks made the same day by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry. Lavrov criticised the US for using the talks to

achieve “regime change”, while Kerry said agreement on a transitional government was the primary goal of the June 2012 Geneva communiqué and accused Russia of backtracking on previous commitments.

Most Council members expect Brahimi to report on what has already been made clear in Geneva and discussed in this week’s bilateral meetings—that the current blockage in the process is due to the government’s unwillingness to accept the proposals on the table. Brahimi seems to have indicated in these meetings that he will not call for a third round of talks if there are no constructive ideas to break the stalemate.

Furthermore, Brahimi is expected to stress the incompatibility of the government’s plans to hold presidential elections this year—media reports indicate in May or June—with the Geneva process. In the regime’s view, elections would render the process moot—in particular the requirement to form a transitional governing body. It seems Brahimi is likely to convey to Council members that if a date for elections is set it will mean the end of the Geneva process.

Earlier this week, France shared a draft press statement with P5 members expressing support for Brahimi and the resumption of talks based on genuine engagement by all parties. The statement apparently underlines the centrality of forming a transitional governing body and states that elections should be organised within the framework of the Geneva peace talks. The text was circulated to all Council members earlier today. It seems the most contentious issues are the references to elections and the approach to resuming peace talks. After France shared the draft with the full Council, Russia circulated amendments to the text, seeking to remove reference to the elections. Russia also seems hesitant to include language specifying how an approach to the resumption of talks should be sequenced, i.e. tackling issues of terrorism and forming a transitional government in parallel. At press time, it was unclear if or when agreement would be reached on the press statement.

Separately, on 3 March, Russia revived its initiative to introduce a text focusing on terrorism in Syria. The P5 have met twice at expert level to discuss the proposed draft but it is unclear whether the initiative will gain traction.

Besides tomorrow’s briefing, the next key moment for Council members on Syria will be on 28 March, when humanitarian chief Valerie Amos will brief Council members in consultations on the first monthly report on the implementation of resolution 2139 on humanitarian access.

Resolutions 2118 on chemical weapons and 2139 on humanitarian access set out the Council’s clear intention to consider further measures in the case of non-compliance. Both resolutions also underscored the importance of the Geneva process in finding a political solution to the crisis. However, despite several Council members’ frustration at the overwhelming lack of cooperation Syria has exhibited on all three of these tracks, there has been no active discussion on concrete action for non-compliance, such as a Chapter VII resolution.

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