All Eyes on Geneva 2

Syria is a bone of contention for many, a lost opportunity for others - and now all eyes are on the upcoming international conference to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, which is to commence in Switzerland on 22 January.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is quoted in the mainstream media as saying it would be "unforgivable not to seize this opportunity" to end a conflict that has left more than 125,000 people dead and 10 million homeless. Given the UN’s role in creating, prosecuting and prolonging bloody conflicts in so many places, such as former Yugoslavia, the Caribbean and Indochina, he ought to know.

The Geneva II conference is charged with laying the foundations for a transitional governing body for Syria acceptable to all sides of the conflict. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, did state last year when they devised this conference that the plan was to "bring the fighting sides to the table" and the stop the unprecedented carnage. Today the reasons that brought the U.S. representatives to Geneva remain unclear.

What is clear is that White House wants Assad out of the picture. It now hopes that what could not be accomplished by a proxy war and false flag gas attacks can be achieved by negotiations. After all, if it goes wrong afterwards, the line will be that a UN Agreement has broken down because Assad is too venal to accept it, not that the UN has created this situation by wilfully brokering an agreement the people who have to live under it could never accept.

After Napoleon was defeated in 1814 the map of Europe was redrawn at the Congress of Vienna. Several of the new countries and boundaries thus created proved unsustainable, because the victorious Great Powers of the day did not seek to create or restore justice but to score points off each other by claiming different-sized spheres of influence within Napoleon’s old empire, out of spite at having been battered by him for so long. Ask the Belgians. But at least Napoleon was in exile. What is the agenda of this remarkably similar conference, at which the modern equivalents of the Great Powers of 1814 will sit dividing up the spoils of a post Bashar al-Assad Syria which does not yet exist?

Thanks to the diplomatic intervention of the Russian Federation it is now understood that the gas attack blamed on Assad’s forces, widely reported as such in the world’s media, was in fact a false flag attack, committed by the rebel forces with direct US involvement. Emails between a former US Defence Department bigwig now in the arms trade and members of his family have confirmed this.

This deadly stunt has now “blown up” in the faces of Saudi Arabia, the main funder and supplier of the rebels, and its pit bulls, Qatar, Kuwait and some rogue elements in US intelligence. The boisterous sabre-rattling which followed this, according to the script, has proved mere bluster because Assad is still in office. If you want to achieve regime change, guys, regardless of international law, you will have to do better than that.
The latest news is that UN has withdrawn its invitation to Iran to join 40 countries at the negotiating table. This must have something to do with the confidential discussions that were held for weeks now that Iran was going to bring up the question of Saudi's involvement in the conflict at the conference. No wonder than that the opposition has been threatening the international community to withdraw from the conference due to Iran’s involvement.

The entire Syrian ordeal is fast becoming a diplomatic and political quagmire for the United States. While Saudi Arabia, remains willing to bankroll the unabated killing and pay for the transport of jihadists into Syria. It continues to support Islamic extremist groups and groups aligned with terrorists.

The US’ hypocrisy in prolonging the conflict, rather than who did what, is now the focus of international concern, but of course this is the one thing Geneva II will never discuss. Nor is it likely to discuss the fact that the arming of Syria's rebels and various elements linked to al-Qaeda has been a debacle, both politically and on the frontline, with the Syrian government forces making gains and consolidating public support.

The “knocking off” of Syria was seen by US military planners as a stepping stone for putting the final pressure on Iran to capitulate to US demands concerning its alleged nuclear weapons programme and enhance its energy hegemony in the region. While Assad is still there, Syria will act as a sovereign nation. If compliant “international forces” take over, it will be Airstrip One, Middle East.

Bashar al-Assad is not going to step down, and elections within Syria, on his terms, will decide both his and his country’s future. But the US will not negotiate with him, again in defiance of international law. It regards rebels, regardless of the merits of their case, as legitimate representatives of the Syrian people rather than a side of the conflict.

But what has the US gained from this policy? It has chosen to recognise and negotiate with the Islamic Front, a coalition of Islamist groups supposedly not aligned with al-Qaeda. Obama's U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf has said, “We wouldn’t rule out the possibility of meeting with the Islamic Front, which we can naturally engage with because they are not [at least officially] designated terrorists.”

Of course it is the US who decides who is and is not a terrorist. But these negotiations have proven so unfruitful that the official line now is that there are still too many diverse groups fighting in Syria to be able to negotiate with any of them. The question is, why should the rebels discuss ending the conflict when the people who want them to do this are still bankrolling and supplying them and giving them the chance of gaining power by force?

As in most conflicts, the various combatant sides often have diametrically different expectations of what would happen if Assad was overthrown and they are soon likely to end up fighting one another, as in Afghanistan before the end of the Soviet occupation. However it should be asked why many of them are fighting in the first place, other than for the fees and other benefits provided by regional paymasters, especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Back in June the “Action Group for Syria” issued a Communiqué which called for a coming together of the parties out of “grave alarm at the situation in Syria: continued and escalating killing, destruction and human rights abuses and the failure to protect civilians ... and the potential for deep conflict within the country and the spilling over of the fighting into “the regional dimensions of the problem.”’ The Geneva Conference, whatever else it is, is anything but this.

Having failed to achieve their aim of bringing down Assad by either force or black PR, the major Western powers now believe it is high time for “all Syrian parties to engage seriously and constructively” in bringing this matter to equitable resolution. Without, of course, acknowledging their own complicity in all the killings. It’s hard to save your face when the blood on it can be seen for miles around.

Much political capital and effort has been wasted in intervening in the Syrian conflict for ends which have nothing to do with the welfare of Syrians. Instead of furthering US foreign policy interests in the region the Syrian crisis has proved a windfall for those who fail to appreciate the virtue of the United States’ self-proclaimed mission to be the policeman of the world, or the methods used to fulfil this.

The Geneva Conference is a means of saving face, giving the major powers a get out if things go wrong, but not actually changing the situation on the ground. There is no incentive to cease fighting; all the Western aligned players are sponsoring their favourite rebel or terrorist group, whose members no longer have civilian lives to go back to. It didn't have to be this way, but Syrians found friends abroad naively believing that they cared about the issues of the conflict, and thought Syrian lives are worth something.
Seth Ferris, investigative journalist and political scientist, expert on Middle Eastern affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.