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Statement by

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**“Syria After Geneva II: Next Steps Toward Ending the Conflict”**

**Introduction**

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Corker, members of the committee for this opportunity to testify before you on options for addressing the crisis in Syria after the Geneva II talks, and in particular on the geopolitical implications of the conflict.

My name is Vali Nasr and I am the Dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

Since 2011, the crisis in Syria has evolved from an uprising of the people in a quest for freedom into a civil war with broad international and regional implications. There is no sign of an end to the fighting. Neither the Assad regime nor the opposition is strong enough to win, and the civil war is bound to continue, moving toward an intractable stalemate.

The international effort led by the United Nations in two rounds of talks in Geneva failed to end the war. Those efforts focused primarily on bringing about an agreement between the United States and Russia, which has strategic, economic, and historical motivations to support the Assad regime. That goal proved elusive because

- The United Nations failed to bridge the gap between the United States and Russia. The United States sees Assad’s removal from power as essential to ending the conflict, and therefore saw Geneva talks as the mechanism for replacing the Assad regime with a transitional government. Russia sees the problem in Syria as one of extremism and Islamic terrorism. Furthermore, Russia does not envision an outcome in which Assad steps down; in the unlikely event that Assad ever did step down, Russia does not believe it would lead to a viable government that can rule Syria.

- The Geneva talks downplayed the importance of regional actors. The United States and Russia are critical to galvanizing the international community around a solution to the Syrian crisis. Cooperation between the two is important in the United Nations Security Council, as was evident in securing an agreement to dismantle Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.

However, the United States and Russia are not the main outside actors in Syria. Rather, both the Assad regime and the opposition are armed, financed and supported by regional actors. The Assad regime owes its survival not to Russia but to Iran and its regional allies, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Shia militias whose military and intelligence support has kept Assad's forces from crumbling and then taking the offensive. Similarly, it is Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia that have financed and armed the rebels, keeping up the opposition's pressure on Damascus.

Repeating Geneva II will not achieve the intended result of ending the stalemate in Syria. First, U.S.-Russia dynamics have become more complicated by the crisis in Ukraine. If the two nations could not agree on Syria before, it will be all the more difficult to do so following the Russian annexation of Crimea. Second, even if there was a U.S.-Russian agreement on Syria, it could not be implemented without the support of regional actors with stakes in the conflict.

There is need for a new approach to Syria, one that starts with the following assumptions:

- The regional actors have far more at stake in this conflict than the United States or Russia.
- The Syrian civil war is integral to the regional struggle for power. Its outcome will decide the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and most significantly, Saudi Arabia and Iran. These regional powers are acting with the understanding that the future of the Middle East will be decided in Syria.
- The civil war has touched off region-wide sectarian tensions that have polarized opinion on Syria and cast the conflict as a zero-sum struggle for power between Shias and Sunnis.
- The Syrian refugee crisis has become a regional security challenge. The number of refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey is an economic burden and political threat to those countries—and this problem will only grow as more refugees escape the fighting.
- The Middle East lacks any regional mechanisms that would allow regional actors to resolve this conflict.

Given these assumptions, the time has come for the United States and the international community to consider a new diplomatic approach that incorporates the interests and stakes of all regional powers heavily invested in Syria.

### **The Regional Actors' Stake in Syria**

The Syrian conflict is happening at a time of geostrategic change, domestic turmoil, and rebalancing of power in the Middle East. Egypt, the largest and traditionally most influential Arab country, is preoccupied with internal problems. Meanwhile, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran have all amplified their engagement in Syria to tilt the balance of power in favor of their particular geopolitical interests.

#### *Qatar*

Qatar has intensified its regional role, and that has been an irritant to its old rival, Saudi Arabia. Qatar sees its role in Syria as part of its broader design to influence regional trends, which also includes deep engagement in Libya and Egypt. Qatar's support in Syria has been important to key elements of the political opposition and fighters on the ground.

## *Turkey*

Turkey shares a long border with Syria and is now home to a large Syrian refugee population. Turkey's policy toward Syria was premised on the assumption that the Assad regime would fall quickly. Three years on, this assumption is no longer self-evident, and Turkey finds itself threatened by chaos and growing extremism next door. Turkey is worried that Syria's sectarian tensions would spill over into Turkey, and also that the impact of the fighting on Syrian Kurds would impact Turkey's own delicate Kurdish situation.

Turkey no longer has influence with the government in Damascus, and it has had to compete with Saudi Arabia and Qatar for influence over the opposition. In addition, preoccupation with domestic issues has limited Turkey's ability to exercise control over developments in Syria. These circumstances are pushing Turkey to look for a strategy to end the Syrian civil war.

## *Saudi Arabia*

Saudi Arabia has been unhappy with Turkey's growing influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have been competing for influence over the Syrian opposition—which explains in part the opposition's inability to put up a united front before the Assad regime.

More important, Saudi Arabia sees the outcome in Syria as critical to checking and even reversing Iran's regional influence. If the Assad regime falls, Iran would suffer a strategic blow that could also weaken its position in Lebanon and Iraq.

## *Iran*

Iran by the same token sees the survival of Assad's regime as a vital strategic imperative. The appearance of defeat in Syria would weaken Iran's regional influence, but also make it more difficult for Iran to continue negotiations with P5+1—for fear that its perceived weakness would make the international six-party team unyielding.

## **Recommendations**

The time when the Syria conflict could have ended with an agreement between the United States and Russia has passed.

Currently the four Middle East powers—Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran—have far higher stakes in Syria than the United States and Russia, hence their heavy investments in deciding the outcome. A diplomatic solution must have their acquiescence and support.

The task remains before all of us to facilitate an agreement to end this war. The United States and the international community could provide the necessary link to get the regional backers of the warring factions to start a diplomatic process. In particular, the United States has strong ties with Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and should use that influence to bring their positions in Syria into alignment.

As a first step, the United States and its European allies should focus diplomatic attention on

- Bringing Saudi, Qatari and Turkish positions on Syria into alignment
- Unifying the Syrian opposition
- Laying the groundwork for a regional diplomatic framework for ending the war in Syria. That framework could set the parameters for Iran and Iraq's participation in the process.

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