

TIP Conference Call with Tony Badran

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that, thank you for joining us all of you who are on the line and thank you also to Tony Badran for joining us this morning, to talk about the upcoming Geneva II talks, which as I'm sure you know are kicking off this morning. There was weekend drama with Iran being invited and uninvited. There was morning drama with the plane that was carrying the Syrian delegation making a stop in Athens and having some trouble taking back off. There was, of course, a bombing this morning in Beirut. The situation is as complicated as these things get in diplomacy but we wanted specifically to bring folks together to begin to contextualize not just what's going on but, in a more precise sense, if these talks go bad, how do they go bad. What looks like success that isn't success, what looks like failure that might not be the worst that can happen. And to help us do that today, we have Tony Badran, who's of course a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He is a regular columnist for NowLebanon and can be found on Twitter at @AcrossTheBay, @AcrossTheBay. I won't take up any more time, we've got, we're on a truncated schedule this morning. After Tony's done speaking, we will have a couple of questions that have come in by email and then we'll open it for Q&A like we usually do. And on that note, thank you Tony and go ahead.

Tony Badran:

Thanks very much, I appreciate it Omri, and thank you all for joining in. I'm just going to very briefly take up where Omri left off on how this thing can go bad and then, you know, we'll open it up. Basically, look, I don't think anybody in, you know, in the world really believes that this conference has any potential of, you know, yielding something good. It's just not, it's contrary to human, laws of human nature, you know, when there's no lever of force that forces people to change behavior, people are not just going to change behavior. So we, the stalemate that we have with the potential of it tilting in favor of the regime as we move forward is very much, you know, what's, what's in store, I think, and there are many pitfalls. We already saw some of them in the lead-up to this conference. One of them is basically that it shifts the onus away from the regime onto the opposition. You know, there's plenty of pressure that was applied to the opposition to get them to come, despite the fact that they have been completely abandoned in any, you know, any way, in any normal sense of the world. Basically, when the United States was saying that it was going to use some sort of military force against the regime after the chemical weapons attack, it didn't. It reversed it and entered into a partnership with the regime over this disposal of the chemical weapons, adding to its legitimacy. Then, you know, the idea of military aid to the opposition, which was always really a fantasy, I mean it was never really seriously undertaken, was completely abandoned even as a plan or as a thought. So these guys have, have no, you know, no military aid coming from the West at all or any prospects for any military aid coming from the West. So that's, with that, they were asked to go and there was pressure put on them. We've heard maybe that, you know, that through the United States, Turkey may have, you know, said that, you know, look 'you have to go or else we may have to close the border.' I mean, whether it's true or not, I don't know, but this is the kind of stuff that was coming out at the time in the lead-up to the, to the conference when the opposition was so reluctant.

Basically further down the road, the potential for continuing to shut down avenues of military support or financial support are very likely to continue if the United States, for instance, with the Russians, be that, you know, this is not, there has to be, there has to be a stop. There is no military option so we have to make sure that there's no military option. The United States has already been putting pressure on Kuwaiti and Gulf charities under the pretext that they fund extremists in Syria, but, you know, these charities don't only fund extremists. Even though, and even if they do fund extremists, not all of these extremists are Al Qaeda guys. Right, so these are just Islamic formations fighting the Assad regime. So, it's unclear in the absence of U.S. support for the non-Islamic extremist factions in

Syria are, what the thinking is about shutting down avenues pretty much across the board through closing down financial aid from the Gulf. This is another potential for how, you know, what can start under a lofty headline, you know, 'we don't want extremism in Syria' or, 'we don't want,' you know, 'any more military carnage' can actually just play into the hands of the regime, because the regime is clearly not under any such restriction and there is no counter-pressure from anybody.

I mean, the only thing that the United States goes in, into Geneva is reliance on Russia and Iran's goodwill to somehow pressure the regime into behaving some way. And then, and of course, into somehow getting itself out of existence by walking out, you know, off the stage. It's just not going to happen. And if it's going to happen then once it becomes clear that this is not going to happen, then the danger becomes that that you start to dilute the objective of this process. On the one hand, you know, you start talking about 'well okay, let's not talk about regime change for now, this is a long process, that's going to happen at the end of that long indefinite process; for now, let's get deliverables that will, you know, palliative measures that will help the population and relieve, you know, the suffering and so let's talk about localized ceasefires and humanitarian corridors.' Of course, this will allow the regime, which has a shortage of manpower and an exhausted military to, you know, relieve forces, rotate forces, conserve resources. And then because it's the government, it will add to its legitimacy as the one that dispenses humanitarian aid, which is already by the way, it's already doing this. So, it will condition delivery of food and humanitarian aid on the surrender of besieged area or, you know, having certain conditions met in those areas that will allow the regime to boost its standing. On top of adding to its legitimacy as the actual government with whom all the international players, I mean, as a, deal with, as an interlocutor. It will add, it could add therefore to further splits between the United States and its various allies in the region with whom relations are already tense.

And then, basically, the, you know, the fundamental issue is that this is a process that's really, that exists in virtual reality, because it has no actual means of force on the ground, on the part of the United States to get what it wants. So, you know, they need this because they view this as the only game in town, they don't have anything else to go with so the United States is gonna go with this. But at the same time, the positions, I mean the objectives of it are muddled so it's unclear then how this can go forward if the United States is saying 'well, we just really want Assad out, but we really want to preserve regime institution.' Well, if this is your starting position, then Assad all of sudden doesn't go because you can't have really the regime without Assad. Assad is the regime. Then what happens, do you start to dilute and lower expectations and demands? Well, maybe it's not, he shouldn't be playing a role whatsoever, maybe we'll dilute that to maybe, he can stay on as president but, you know, supposedly with limited authority, let's say. And, you know, and then once you concede that, there's the potential for more, you know, concessions and deterioration, you know, can move forward. And there are already types of, you know, of this kind of thinking in the White House. You know, at the end of last year in December, the *Wall Street Journal*, reported that some senior administration officials are now privately talking about Mr. Assad staying for the foreseeable future and voice regret about the decision in August 2011 to "call for him to step aside". You know, so this is clearly all part of the pitfalls of this process and then ultimately, it may all lead back to Assad basically, to the United States because the more this becomes a security problem, the more the priority is, you know, Al Qaeda in Syria and all that and then when there is really no other alternative, you know, even throughout this process, then basically, basically, the default position would be somehow to restart, to open channels again through the regime which we saw another report in the *Wall Street Journal* about how European intelligence agencies are already opening channels, and one Western diplomat told the *Journal* that while this is not yet an opening, a full opening to the regime, "after Geneva, you may have an opening." So it depends if Geneva ends up rehabilitating Assad in that sense, diverting away from what is now the goal of removing him once that proves unachievable months and months down the road.

And then, obviously, the last thing, and I'll end with this, is that the Russians are going in there with a plan, with the Syrians and with Iranian blessing as well, that the focus of this thing should be to fight terrorism, right. And on this, they are reading really the tea leaves in Washington, when the President of the United States tells David Remnick that the idea is to work with the Iranians and the Russians and those who have been financing the opposition to make sure that they're not creating the kind of extremist force that we saw emerge out of Afghanistan, OK. So, when he defines the problem as the emergence of an extremist force, then the Russians and the Iranians and the Syrians can play to that and say 'well, very good, then we want to fight terrorism too and, you know, if anybody from the opposition wants to join in with us, then that's the way moving forward.' And they're very consistent, they're very on message with this. Whereas our position or the sort of, you know, the pro-opposition faction within the international community, let's say France, Britain, and the United States, with the exception of France and Saudi Arabia and maybe Turkey and Qatar to a certain extent, everybody else is wobbly; so the potential for splits in this camp are also very high. So I think I'll stop here and then we'll just pick it up with the Q&A.

Omri Ceren: Great, thanks for that. Operator, if we could give the instructions for queuing up. Okay, while we wait for people to queue up, we've got a couple of questions that came in over email. A bunch of them deal, in general, just with the generic Iran incident that happened over the weekend, where Iran was invited and uninvited. While we were on this call, the *Washington Post* published an article that the Iranians are typically blaming Washington for the misunderstanding or whatever you would call it. I was wondering if we could get your take on what happened, and also on how it fits with what Iran wants out of the talks?

Tony Badran:

Right, well, Iran if you monitor the sort of the pro-Hezbollah media in Lebanon as well as the Iranian media, one of the things, one of the things that have been emerging from them, is that basically, they view Geneva as the icing upon the cake in terms of America's acknowledgement of Iran as the leader of a new, of the new regional order, essentially. So now, Iran is brought in as an indispensable interlocutor in discussions of security issues, political issues throughout the region. So they viewed, they viewed this in that sense and they clearly wanted to despite their rhetoric, they wanted to come and what's interesting is that, the United States wanted them to come too. If you go back a few weeks, when John Kerry was saying something that 'Well, even if they're not invited, there are very other indirect ways that they can play a role. Maybe come in as observers, maybe come...' you know, so basically they wanted them there in some capacity. And again, I go back to the quote from President Obama in *The New Yorker*, when he said that basically 'we want, the way forward is to work with states that support Assad on the one hand and those who support the opposition.' And he specifically doesn't say just the Russians, he says the Russians and the Iranians. So he views dealing with the Iranians on this issue as the way forward. Now, of course they can't just do that without the whole thing falling apart because Saudi Arabia threatened that it will withdraw and the opposition more importantly said, 'look, we're not going to come with the Iranians at the table, period. Done.' So what, so then the administration said, 'well you know, there has to be an explicit commitment to the terms of Geneva I, which is sort of the transitional, an acceptance of the transitional government.' The irony here of course is that while Russia accepts Geneva I, it interprets it in a completely different way than the United States. It doesn't see in it anything that says that Assad has to go or that Assad can't play a role, because Assad's name is not mentioned in Geneva I, which is the only way that they got to agree to it.

But what happened then is that they tried to find, through Ban Ki-moon, some sort of a formula where Iran will say something to Ban Ki-moon orally, giving him assurances that they agree with the premises of Geneva, of the Geneva meeting and then everything will be wrapped up, you know, and

then they can come. Apparently, Ban Ki-moon, when he got whatever he wanted to hear from the Iranians, he announced the invitation at which point the opposition said, 'no, we're not going to come,' Saudi Arabia said 'no, we're not going to come.' So there was, the whole thing was in jeopardy. So then the United States had to say, 'well, look, no, no, no, they have to make a very explicit commitment to Geneva I, at which point, the Iranians say, 'Well if that's the case then, you know, we're not coming, we're not going to do this. We don't see this as legitimate in any way.' So the whole thing fell apart. But what's interesting is that the spokesperson for Ban Ki-moon said that the United States was not taken by surprise in this case. As a matter of fact, that they were in on these talks, Ban Ki-moon kept them abreast of all these talks as they happened. So they weren't surprised that he was talking to them, they weren't surprised that there were some sort of negotiations over the formula that the Iranians would say and the assurances that they would give him. So clearly, he thought that he had something that he felt, you know, was good enough or maybe not, maybe he tried to force the hand but ultimately, the administration knew what was going on. It just blew up in their face when the opposition and the Saudis said 'No, we're going to torpedo the whole thing if you go ahead with this.'

Omri Ceren: The next question is about an issue that's kind of been bubbling under the surface for several months, for several years, which has to do with cooperation between Assad and some of the most radical extremist Sunni groups. *The Telegraph*, in recent days, published an explicit claim [inaudible] what their intelligence source is saying that there had actually been a secret agreement. For many, many months we have heard things, like the Syrian army knows which sniper nests are ISIS and which sniper nests are FSA, and they would target only FSA. Could you untangle some of the more credible versions versus the less credible theories about implicit or explicit cooperation between the regime and the more extremist opposition forces?

Tony Badran:

Look, first of all, the idea itself, the concept of cooperation between these two, should not be surprising for a number of reasons. First of all, these guys know each other. Let's not forget, right, that the Assad regime in, especially in Iraq, was the prime exporter of these guys, I mean they knew them, they had their own double agents working with them; they were helping, you know, they were recruiting them; they were bringing them in through the airport, bussing them in through the border, sending them out, sometimes they would arrest them, they would flip them in jail, become informants for the regime, etc., etc. And they held a lot of them in their jails prior to the, to this thing, to the, to the Syrian uprising, and they let them go on purpose. Now, whether some of them were let go just to be, you know agents of chaos and others maybe who, who knows what kind of ties they still maintain with military intelligence and so on and so forth. So every, all of this stuff is very, very, very murky but shouldn't be surprising.

Second, in these kinds of situations, as we saw, let's say, in the Lebanese War, that there should be some form of collaboration, especially in the economic area, is also not surprising. I mean, this goes back, you know, to how warfare was conducted many, many hundreds of years ago. I mean, in this, I, I look at the specifically at the precedence of the Crusader period, when, you know you had the Crusades on the coast and then the various Muslim emirates inside, and they had areas, what were called areas of shared revenues. So there would be areas where, let's say trade would happen, and convoys could pass, and they would split the revenues among them, of course despite the fact that they fighting each other. So that this happens in the modern era is, again, hardly surprising. The regime needs oil. ISIS and Jabat Nusra control oil fields and pipelines. That there would be an agreement for them to kind of share revenue in this case is, is not, is not surprising to me. But also, you can go back, there are interviews going back several months from ISIS guys who were saying, there was one guy, a deputy commander of the northern sector who worked under this Chechen leader, Omar Shishani, up in northern Syria, who

said, 'look, you know I have to tell you the truth, that ISIS as well as other rebel formations are deeply penetrated by intelligence.' So, now, it doesn't necessarily mean that intelligence tells them what to do or you know, but it could then lead to certain tactical convergences depending on where you're going, and what, what the operation is. Like, we saw, for instance, you know that they never bombed certain areas of ISIS, and the minute ISIS was pushed out by the rebels, now recently in fighting, then the regime starts to hit them, to hit these areas for the first time. So, so, you know, there's a tactical convergence and it doesn't surprise me in the least.

Omri Ceren: Alright, let's go to questions, Operator.

Natasha Mozgovaya (Voice of America): Firstly, thank you for doing this call. I was wondering, you said that not so much good will come out of this conference. Do you see any potential for some alternative, say local Middle Eastern track, maybe, maybe, you know Iran, Saudi Arabia? And second, do you see an actual alignment between Moscow and Washington position because of this growing presence of extremists among the opposition?

Tony Badran:

Yes, I think, for the second part of your question, I think absolutely there is a de facto alignment between the United States and Russia on this issue. I mean, they'll still disagree, at least publicly, right, they will disagree about the fate of Assad, and you know, what drives maybe extremism in Syria and so on. But there's no question that the priority, in terms of you know, threat assessment for the United States administration has been the rise of extremism in Syria. It's not, you know, it's never been, the Syria situation has never been formulated strategically by this administration as an Iran issue, meaning as dealing a blow to Iranian influence in the region, rolling back Iranian influence in the region. Everything has been focused on sort of the Sunni side of things, not so much on the Iranian side of things, you know. And I think that the notion of this, having to lead to a certain understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia is highly unlikely because the Saudis view this as very much a matter of the regional balance of power and their own national security. They're looking around, not just with the United States rapprochement with the Iranians and what the potential of that may be for them but also that, you know, they're looking at Yemen, they're looking at Bahrain, they're looking at Iraq, and they're looking at Syria, as areas where Iran is meddling or has the upper hand. Oftentimes, hand in hand with the United States, for instance, as in, let's say in Iraq. Oh, and not to mention Lebanon as well. So they view this with great, you know understandable consternation. This is a serious issue. So the idea that they're going to allow for a, a solution in Iran – in Syria – that accommodates Iran, you know is really, again part of that virtual reality I was talking about. It doesn't exist because the Iranians don't have an option in Syria. Contrary to what you hear, they don't have an option in Syria that's not Assad. There is no such thing. There is no alternative power.

This is, this goes back to the fiction that we started to see in 2011 and 2012, when people started talking about this palace coup in, the idea of a palace coup in Syria, where you have this magical Alawi figure, a general who is going to depose Assad and then lead the Alawites into a settlement with the Sunnis and everybody will be happy. And, you know three years on, we're still looking for this elusive figure. It doesn't exist. The structure of power in the regime, is, it's Assad. I mean, it's the family. It's not, there is no such thing as a regime institution in the sense that we understand a deep state, let's say in the past in Turkey or with the military in Egypt, and or what have you. It doesn't exist in Syria. So all of this notion, that you can somehow have the Iranians dump Assad and safeguard their regime and then reap some sort of an accommodation with Saudi Arabia where they can have a condominium in Syria, is really fanciful at this point. Everything is geared for the Iranians to safeguarding the regime. They're spending, you know they, look at how important it is they send Hezbollah in full-force. Hezbollah's

taking casualties, very significant casualties, and, and, Khamenei's edict is 'go, no matter what it takes.' So, the idea that the Saudis are going to say, 'well okay, we're going to agree with you now to reach an accommodation that keeps you in charge of Syria' is completely fanciful to me.

Benny Avni (Newsweek): Hey, thanks for doing this. So, the way I saw this whole episode over the weekend was basically the Iranians probably sold Ban Ki-moon a bill of goods, saying, you know, 'okay, I'll agree,' and the phone call, Zarif saying, you know, 'I'll agree.' And then Ban thought he heard at least that they agree. And then publicly they refused to say they agree to Geneva I. So the question is: Can you extrapolate from this to how the Iranians are dealing and maybe learn, have a lesson here about the Iranian deal as well, the, I mean the Iranian nuclear deal?

Tony Badran:

I mean, one could extrapolate, if you'd like, you know, the idea of what the meaning of, or lesson of what is oral assurances that are given maybe to you and you maybe hear what you want to hear in them versus what they actually do and what they actually believe in. I mean, you can, to me, like for instance, the famous Khamenei fatwa is a good such example if you'd like. But I think, I mean I think really it's separate because what the Iranian deal, even the stuff that's written and agreed on is not that hot either. So I'm not really sure we need to, you know read into these kinds of side agreements to worry in a way. Although, interestingly, you know we saw there was a report in the *LA Times* a few days ago about sort of this extra, side non-paper agreement that's being kept secret, that the Iranians are claiming. And so, you know, if true, god knows what's in that, and how judging from the episode that we just saw now with the Ban Ki-moon fiasco, you know if it's anything remotely similar then clearly it's not something, you know, it's something to be concerned about. But we don't know. I mean, we don't know what that is. And actually, if I may, just a quick note to that, I mean because Zarif is the guy who's talking to Ban Ki-moon, too. Yeah, I mean we want to project all kinds of moderation onto Zarif and what have you. But let's not forget where he was just last Monday, right, laying a wreath at Imad Mughniyah's grave, gravesite in Beirut. OK, so, you know, Jay Carney said it when he was dismissing Rouhani's statements that the West had surrendered to Iran. He said it's not, it doesn't matter what they say, it's actions that matter. Well, you know, Zarif's action one hopes is evidence of that.

Trudy Rubin (The Philadelphia Inquirer): Hi, thanks very much for doing this. I'm wondering since you believe, I think most people do, that these talks are headed for abject failure, where you think Syria is going to be in a year or two's time. Do you think it's possible that Assad will actually reclaim most of Syrian territory except for some small areas in the Northeast, or do you think there's going to be a de facto split in the country, three ways with the Kurds? And if that's the outcome, then what happens in the region? Does that split the lawn forever? I mean, it doesn't seem as there was in Taif to be one outside power that can force the pieces to come back together again.

Tony Badran:

Right, it really depends. One of the things about Assad is, I mean we'll start with both, you know, an assessment of both sides. One of the things with Assad is despite, you know, certain tactical gains, if you look at them closely, they're not all that impressive. You know, they're more, they're amplified precisely to give the impression and perception of Assad having the upper hand. I mean, and you can make a case in terms of momentum that perhaps, if extrapolated over the longer term, such types of gains as small as they may be may actually end up tipping, tipping the balance in the long term. But, for now, you know for all the infighting among the opposition, the really significant losses that they've sustained fighting ISIS in the north, the lack of proper support, in fact the shutting down at the behest of the United States of various avenues of support coming into them, the fact that Assad has not been able

to capitalize in any significant strategic manner on these, on these weaknesses suggests, you know, the limits of what he can do.

And it's, a lot of it has to do with manpower shortage. I mean, despite the fact that he has all these Shia militia fighting with him, it's not enough. It's not enough manpower to be able to assault, clear, and then hold territories, and then keep moving on. Which is why they tried to do this business with localized ceasefires and sieges, you know to try to starve out certain areas and then force surrender on them that way. And you know, and that's one of the pitfalls I warned about in Geneva, you know that it might lead to something like that. But even with all of those, really the lines haven't shifted. Now there's a little bit of a movement up in Aleppo on the side of the regime where they're trying to capitalize on the fighting with ISIS and they're trying to move in in certain areas. And should they, should they be able to actually succeed and hold these areas, they might, it might enable them to encircle Aleppo and potentially, you know, and potentially reclaim it. But for now, this is really a ways off. I don't see this happening anytime soon. But you know, one has to keep an eye on these dynamics.

On the other side, though, it's not the rebels have stopped winning areas, okay. Now, we saw the Qusayr battle in last summer and everybody viewed it as, you know this major strategic victory for, you know that tipped the momentum in Assad's favor. Well guess what? The entire countryside of Qusayr now is being systematically lost back to the rebels, and this is one of the main things, by the way, that has to do with the violence in Lebanon, the uptick in violence in Lebanon. You know, there's the Qusayr issue and there's what's called the Qalamoun Hills which is along the Lebanese eastern border west of Damascus, you know that run along the Bekaa all the way up to Qusayr. So these, I mean this area is also where the regime was supposedly, supposedly, you know massing troops to retake it and secure the border with Lebanon entirely. And guess what? I mean, they still haven't done anything that's remotely successful in this case, not even around Damascus. [Inaudible] is still out of their hands, despite the various, you know sieges and so on and so forth. So, again, you know it depends, really there are things that could tip it in Assad's favor over the long term depending on how we behave, how we force our allies to behave, the forces of the opposition to behave, how Iran and Russia continue to sustain the regime, as we restrain our allies and so on. That may sort of end up shifting this into, in Assad's favor. But for now it's really all been very static. Nothing strategic has happened in that sense.

As a result, what you do have is really a status quo now of various areas of influence. But that's good for Assad and Iran insofar as he's still there, and he's reclaiming a status of an, a legitimate interlocutor with a lot of players in the West, at least with their intelligence agencies, let's say. And it may, it may proceed forward, so that may just be enough, and then the rest of the country, you know the rebels might end up fighting each other even more. And the, it's not that the Kurds by the way are any less divided either. You have the PYE, which is the pro-PKK faction, and then you have the pro-Barzani faction, and they have fought each other as well. So that may, you know, that may well lead into further fragmentation there. So it's not that any of these areas are going to be, you know, completely fully divided and clear. It's, they're fluid as well.

Omri Ceren: And on that note, we're out of time for today. I know that there were still a couple of people in the queue and I invite them or anyone else who has follow up for Tony or me, or follow up just in general on this topic, to ping us at press@theisraelproject.org, press@theisraelproject.org, and we will make the connections that we can make. And as always, if you have any other issues, you know where to reach us. And, again, Tony, thank you for joining us today. And thank you to everybody who dialed in.