



The January talks between members of the Syrian opposition and representatives of the Syrian government in Moscow can be seen from two different perspectives:

- 1 – As a sort of an alternative to the Geneva II conference, which aimed at bringing representatives of the opposition forces and the government to one table in order to find a solution to stop the bloodshed and to agree on the terms of implementing this solution;
- 2 – As preliminary talks which by themselves do not aim to bring an end to the Syrian uprising, but attempt to find new ideas on *possible* solutions to end the conflict.

If to look at the meeting from the first perspective, which seems to be how most Western journalists and some scholars see the issue, then this is an immature and ill-prepared initiative. Such meetings should occur rarely and only after an agreement is reached that the majority of the main protagonists will attend. When such meetings become (which basically has already happened) a frequent event, with practically nothing changing thereafter, parties/groups will go to such meeting only if they "have to" in order not to disappoint their donors or because participants can enjoy nice hotel services for free. Thus, such meetings lose their legitimacy in the eyes of all sides engaged. Russia or other nations, which organize such events, have to unofficially come to an agreement with some important players from both sides to ensure certain solutions can be reached and when they meet, participants will discuss certain details and officially announce the agreement shortly thereafter. The crucial point here is that terms of this agreement will have perhaps a small but real effect on the ground. Therefore, next time Russia or any other country calls groups of the opposition to attend, they will be afraid to be left out of the play should they fail to attend. I acknowledge that it is indeed very difficult to arrange such meetings (and for instance almost impossible for Russia to do so by itself, without the support from the United States and some Gulf countries).

However, if one is to look more into Russian press and statements made by Russian officials and the moderator of the event, Vitaly Naumkin, it will become clear that the talks have very different aims and goals than previous international conferences and meetings on Syria. Let

us first clarify some details about the event. First of all, the meeting is seen by the organizers as *not* an international conference, but as an intra-oppositional and intra-Syrian event. It is planned that neither Russian nor international political or non-political representatives will participate in the meeting. Furthermore, invited members of the opposition are supposed to express and represent their own opinions, not those of their coalitions or groups. There is also an open agenda, with no preliminary statements to be made. The only requirement for the participation in the meeting is the adherence to the Geneva Communiqué. Journalists will not be allowed to attend the event as this could obstruct more open and direct expression of opinions.

Now I would like to draw more attention to the participants. This also proves that the second vision as noted above is more accurate. From the list of the invited persons most represent non-military opposition and with the exception of Saleh Muslim Mohammed do not have military influence inside Syria. At the same time their names are known. As Aron Lund said “a number of prominent exiles and veteran activists inside Syria who have spent years in jail for their criticism of the Syrian government”¹, representatives of minorities such as Alawites, Christians and Kurds, as well as several women have been invited.

Finally, it is important to notice that the moderator of the event is not a politician, but one of the most prominent and well-known Russian Orientalist scholars, – professor Vitaly Naumkin. Naumkin has a very rich knowledge of the history of the Middle East, Islamic and political studies, army experience, he lectured at Russia’s best universities, holds a number of important scholarly positions, including Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (which is the best Russian institute in the field), and has tens of publications. In addition, he is one of the best Arabic simultaneous interpreters in the country. Thus, his knowledge will allow Naumkin to easily understand the discussions, to anticipate possible directions of the development of certain topics and lead them when necessary. It will also help, although within a small circle, to underscore the opinion that Russia has people who have an intimate understanding of Middle Eastern Affairs of which the United States is often accused of not having.

¹ Lund, Aron. ‘Russia Fails to Sway the Syrian Opposition’. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Russia Fails to Sway the Syrian Opposition, 15 Jan. 2015. Web. 26 Jan. 2015. <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57727>>.

Thus, on the one hand Russia has shown initiative, which has little chance of failing since the only proclaimed goal is to allow Syrians to discuss their thoughts on possible Syrian solutions on Russian territory. On the other hand, there is a possibility that participants will give birth to some new ideas or approaches, which could be developed further after the meeting and possibly used for another peace initiative. The fact that this will be a solely Syrian meeting, without press, consisting of moderate oppositional leaders who have an in-depth knowledge on Syria there is some hope that a draft for a new solution can be created there. Last, but not least, this meeting will keep Russia as an active participant in the Syrian Peace initiative on the international arena.