Degree Project
Level: Bachelor’s degree

The Syrian War: Portraits with Political Meanings

A Content Analysis of Al-Jazeera’s Coverage of the Intra-Syrian Peace Negotiations

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Course code: SK2016
Credits: 15 credits (hp)
Date of examination: 2019-06-11

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to analyse the contents in texts about the intra-Syrian peace negotiations, as well as identify latent political meanings, through examining how the sides of the war are portrayed in al-Jazeera´s coverage. Dr Zainab Abdul-Nabi suggests in her analysis of al-Jazeera´s coverage of another event in the Syrian war, namely the chemical attack in Ghouta, that al-Jazeera has a catalysing role in the Arab Spring when covering the Syrian war in particular. This study continues along those lines that Abdul-Nabi suggests by analysing the coverage of another event in the Syrian war – the UN-led intra-Syrian peace negotiations. Purposefully, this study should increase the awareness of how political meanings could be hidden in texts.

The theory of agenda setting, a theory by Walter Lippman which was further developed by McCombs and Shaw, is used in this study: media set the agenda by inserting certain portraits of how things are and what the society should be concerned about.

Content analysis is the method used to perform this study, following Halperin and Heath´s model. By interpreting articles from an influential media source – al-Jazeera – the analysis shows that the examined texts portray the opposition as protagonists against a brutal government, plausibly making the media source a part of the war since the texts attempt to set the agenda that a certain side is the protagonists and another is the antagonists. Underplaying the potential capacities of the peace negotiations and not compromising with the other side is evident, as well as holding the other side responsible of the hostilities in the war, in the texts, hence having a catalysing role with its coverage in the war. Also, the texts tend to leave out details concerning the other side (the government side), portraying the opposition to be representing the people.

Keywords:

Syria, war, al-Jazeera, content analysis, qualitative, political meaning, peace negotiations, government, opposition, agenda setting.
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Appendix
1. Introduction

1.1 Introducing the research problem

A large part of political news coverage includes conflict reporting. Pippa Norris explains that political communication is “an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media and the public” (Norris 2004: 1). Political communication includes examining what contents of texts and messages within these texts are being produced, for instance how much it is being reported about politics in the news (2004: 2). Citing the organisation for education, science, and culture in the United Nations, the UNESCO, news media should be “non-partisan and independent institution that enables well-informed citizen decision-making by providing information, serving as a forum for free expression (…)” (Howard 2009: 6).

Conflict reporting is an area where media tell the events as well as mediate in a conflict which is complex and has many sides involved in it. “The media both report on conflict and play a critical part in building consensus” writes Mahmood Mamdani (Orgeret & Tayeebwa eds. 2016: 11). The process of conflict reporting includes the journalist/reporter being active when telling the recipients what has happened – the words that are written or said define the actual event as well as emphasise what or who could be at risk of e.g. suffering due to the conflict. (2016: 11). It tells what has happened and what could happen.

Applying this on the ongoing Syrian war, I look at one of the events of this war which has been covered, and examine the contents of media texts and the messages that lie in these texts. Why is this study relevant? It is important to be aware of how the sides in a conflict are portrayed, because of the political meaning that might be existent – clearly manifested or hidden – in news material. According to the agenda setting theory, media sources can shape the public opinion by shaping the agenda about what and how to think about an object (McCombs & Shaw 1993: 62). (The agenda setting will be further defined in chapter 2).

Imagining this outcome in conflicts such as the Syrian war, it could have political consequences for Syria considering the power that media has in this modern and technological era where a huge number of readers, viewers, and listeners could be reached e.g. through the internet. Reaching out to the majority of them might shape the public opinion in a certain direction. Agenda setting makes the role of the media not merely restricted to providing
people with information but also having a political effect by potentially catalysing the events of a political or armed conflict the way it is being covered, hence this study being important.

In this study, I shall examine texts from the influential news source al-Jazeera about the first three rounds of the intra-Syrian peace negotiations, in order to identify political meanings that are (potentially) apparent in written material. The political relevance of this examination lies in the importance of becoming aware of how the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition are portrayed. Speculating further on the consequences of agenda setting, two potential scenes of consequences might already have appeared in the Syrian war: a) the public opinion starts demanding intervention (or retreat), or b) political actors entering (or not entering) a war against the side that is painted as antagonistic. Linking this to Syria, the country has already experienced several interventions during the war. It might also influence important political decisions concerning Syria, such as support, aid, or sanctions, and so on. Supporting one side and imposing sanctions towards another is also already found in the Syrian war. Abdul-Nabi´s study, which will be central in the theoretical part of this study, exemplifies that even Barack Obama (US president of that time) watched al-Jazeera during the uprising in Egypt in order to follow the developments (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 271f), which exemplifies how influential this news source has managed to become and the wide scope it has managed to reach.

Moreover, the study has political relevance since the context in which the texts to be examined are taken from is a political and armed conflict, namely the Syrian war. It contributes to the field of political communication in terms of what professors Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh call “promoting civic awareness”, the importance of being aware of non-objective news coverage that for instance promotes certain politicians or impedes them (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 225).

### 1.2 Aim and objectives

In this study, the aim is to identify the political meaning in media texts about the Syrian war, by analysing the contents in news articles about the intra-Syrian peace negotiations. To achieve this aim, and in accordance with the delimitation (see chapter 3), the following research questions are formulated:

*How is the opposition portrayed as a political actor?*
How is the government portrayed as a political actor?

How could these portraits be explained?

Answering these questions could allow an increase in awareness and understanding how political meanings could be hidden (or manifested) in texts.

1.3 Background

With the uprising in Syria beginning in Daraa 2011, in what is called the Arab Spring, the Syrian conflict turned out to be different than other uprisings that had taken place previously in the Arab Spring. Breaking the pattern, the government (also called ‘the regime’) did not step down nor was it overthrown, unlike the case in the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Shaping into an endless conflict with increased amounts of armed opposition groups, some of them extremist by nature, and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA\(^1\)) beginning military operations to reclaim lost areas that the rebels had taken control of, the number of victims had risen rapidly which stressed the need to achieve peace in Syria.

This study focuses on texts that were produced in and around the peace negotiations’ first rounds. The first round of the peace negotiations goes back to June 2012. That first round was in fact a meeting where the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria Mr. Kofi Annan gathered 9 states as well as the General Secretary of the UN, the General Secretary of the League of Arab States, and a representative of the foreign and security policy of the EU, under the name ‘the Action Group for Syria’. Following an escalation of violence in the Syrian war, and seeking “an immediate cessation of violence” (Action Group for Syria 2012: 1), this action group met and released a statement known as the Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria. This communiqué, containing guide lines for what is called a Syrian-led transition, is sometimes referred to as the Geneva 1 statement. The meeting of the Action Group came later to be known as Geneva 1 due to it having been held in the Swiss city Geneva, and with peace negotiations planned to be held there in the name Geneva II conference in 2013.

\(^1\) The official military army of the government in the Syrian Arab Republic.
The second round of the peace negotiations was postponed a numerous times. It was finally held in January-February 2014, in Montreux at first and then continuing in Geneva. Another two years later, in February 2016, the third round took off.

The arrangement of the Geneva II conference does not resemble the third round as many changes occurred from the second round to the third. Back in the second round, the Syrian government delegation was headed by the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Muallem, and the delegation consisted of the Deputy Foreign Minister, as well as the Minister of Information, among others (Black, 2014; al-Jazeera b, 2014). Comparing that delegation to the delegation that was sent to the third round in 2016, the newer delegation was dominated by members of the Syrian People´s Assembly and headed by the Syrian UN-ambassador Bashar Jaafari (ORTAS, 2016). This in itself could be considered an attempt to gain a closer representation of the people rather than the government exclusively, since members of the People´s Assembly are chosen by the people in general elections, whilst minister posts are naturally appointed by the head of the government or in this case by the president himself (McDowall, 2018).

The delegation of the opposition has seen a lot of changes from the second round to the third round, not only in the members but also in which opposition groups would be included in the delegation. Many of the opposition groups are armed groups engaged in fighting in Syria and some of them refused the negotiations in Geneva whilst others wished to participate, this being the case in both the second and third round of the negotiations (Afanasieva, 2014).

Opposing each other, and not only the government side, it took until a meeting was held in the Saudi capital Riyadh for the opposition to manage to unify themselves somewhat under the name ‘High Negotiations Committee’, HNC. This meeting took place in mid-December 2015, only a few weeks before the third round was due in Geneva, finally allowing them to announce their participation. (Al Arabiya News, 2015). At the second round, the main Syrian opposition attended as the Syrian National Coalition.

Even in the United Nation, several changes have been made from the earliest rounds until the third round in 2016. For instance, the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria was initially the late Kofi Annan, who resigned in 2012 and

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2 HNC is a coalition of opposition groups, Saudi-backed. When formed in Saudi Arabia 2015, the delegation to be sent to the peace negotiations in Geneva consisted of 30 members: 9 members from the Syrian National Coalition, 6 independent opposition figures, 5 members from the National Coordination Body, and 10 members from armed groups including the Free Syrian Army, the Islam Army, and Ahrar al-Sham, the latter two being listed as terrorist groups by Syria and Russia. (Global Security, 2016).
was replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi. In his turn, Mr Brahimi became the UN Special Envoy to Syria for the Geneva II talks, only to resign in 2014 (after the second round). The third round of the peace talks was mediated by UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura.

Also, new political actors have entered the political arena. In the first two rounds of the peace talks, neither the International Coalition (led by the US) nor the Russians had entered Syria militarily. The Syrian-Kurds´ part have also increased in terms of ground controlled by Kurdish groups (the largest of them being the PYD/YPG\(^3\)), culminating in announcing a federation in northern Syria. Another difference was also the spreading of ISIS with large areas being occupied by them, which wasn´t the situation in the first and second round of the peace talks. Consequently, the change of actors affect how the Syrian war is being shaped, and these circumstances on the ground is likely to be reflected on the negotiations.

While the second round gathered both sides in the same room, the third round did not include any direct negotiations face to face, with the UN Special Envoy to Syria mediating between the sides. The two sides of the negotiations have different priorities as to what is most important to discuss in the second and third round of negotiations – the Syrian National Coalition and the HNC prioritising political transition (al-Jazeera, 2012; Black, 2016), whilst the government delegation prioritises counter terrorism (Sabbagh, 2017) – leading the negotiations nowhere.

Linking this to the study, I look into how the media has handled this political process, by examining the latent meaning in texts from articles about the peace negotiations. This way, it is possible to increase ones awareness and understanding as to how the meaning could be politically rooted. A literature written by Bennett et al about American media, tells that media is moving closer to those in power and becoming a tool of communication for them rather than for the people (Bennett et al 2007: 1). Here is where political meanings might potentially exist in media texts.

2. Theory

2.1 Previous studies

\(^3\) The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People´s Protection Units (YPG), the latter one being the armed wing of the PYD.
Looking into previous studies, Lance W. Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston wrote ‘When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina’. This literature was mentioned in subchapter 1.3 and, even though it is not related to the Syrian war, it elaborates in one of its chapters on the relationship between media and politics. The authors express that “journalists’ propensity to fashion the news to the realities of power as defined by the officials they cover becomes a problem for democracy if and when the resulting news stories exclude or contradict substantial evidence to the contrary.” (Bennett et al 2007: 3).

Furthermore, it mentions how the concept of media being the public guardian of surveilling what is going on has “been pushed out of daily consideration by relentless pressure from the business side of the news media and the tendency of Washington insiders (including members of the elite press) to conflate power with political reality.” (Bennett et al 2007: 1f).

Another previous study, the one being central in this study, is Zainab Abdul-Nabi´s study that talks about al-Jazeera’s coverage of the uprising in Bahrain as well as the chemical attack in Ghouta in the outskirts of Damascus. Abdul-Nabi´s study mentions al-Jazeera to have a “catalytic role” in the so-called Arab Spring, citing that scholars have acknowledged al-Jazeera as unable to be “fully independent in its coverage” from the ruling royal family of Qatar who founded the channel, and the study exemplifies more peaceful reporting about the uprisings in Bahrain (not covering the uprising closely compared to other uprisings in the Arab Spring) in accordance with the lines of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Qatar is a member) compared to the reports about Syria (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 271f). The reporting about Syria, however, were so intense that al-Jazeera could be considered a supporter of the Syrian opposition: “Al Jazeera’s enthusiastic embrace of the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime led the channel on occasion to broadcast inaccurate reports and unverified or fake footage (…)” (2015: 272). The study by Abdul-Nabi analyses al-Jazeera’s reporting along the lines of peace journalism model and war journalism model4, consequently being included within the theoretical part of my study as I continue on a similar line that continues using the idea of analysing coverages concerning the Syrian war – made by al-Jazeera – however not the chemical attack event but the event of the intra-Syrian peace negotiations.

Among the conclusions in Abdul-Nabi’s study is that al-Jazeera’s coverage of the chemical attack in Syria (and of the Bahrain uprising) corresponds with the foreign policy of the state

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4 Peace journalism and war journalism are two theories about conflict reporting, with war journalism emphasising the physical impacts of a conflict as well as violent alternatives, instead of more peaceful alternatives to solve a conflict as with peace journalism (Galtung 1986: 249ff).
of Qatar (2015: 290). Another conclusion is also that al-Jazeera’s coverage falls through when it comes to adopting the model of peace journalism, hence resulting in "a bias in favour of Qatar’s foreign policy, a bias in favour of officials over the voiceless, victims and survivors, a bias in favour of direct violence over cultural and structural violence, contexts, reasons as well as unpermitted opinions and a bias in favour of sectarianism, polarization and war propaganda over solutions, peace initiatives and non-propagandistic analysis." (2015: 292). Consequently, Abdul-Nabi’s study presents how al-Jazeera’s coverage benefits the allies of Qatar, those being the Syrian opposition in the Syrian war (2015: 291).

Exemplifying the risks of bias in coverages, Abdul-Nabi refers to sources that explain the principles that are basic for reporting, as well as explaining whether those principle are possible to implement in reality:

(...) Hanitzsch (2004)\(^5\) points out that being attached to victims is against objectivity, neutrality and impartiality, the basic principles of professional reporting. However, Lynch and McGoldrick (2000)\(^6\) explain that objectivity is impossible to achieve, as journalists and editors are ‘gatekeepers’ who have the choice of what facts should be reported and what facts should not. Yet, they say objectivity could go hand in hand with PJ if it means ‘reporting as we see it rather than deliberately distorting what we see in the service of another agenda’ (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 292).

Another example in Abdul-Nabi’s study is: "Salama (2012)\(^7\), who went to Syria to cover the revolution when it began, criticizes the network’s reporting and concludes that Qatar’s foreign policy has shaped its coverage. Lynch (2013)\(^8\) says that ‘Al-Jazeera has become a major weapon in Qatar’s arsenal, allowing that tiny state to play an outsized role in shaping the Arab agenda’." (2015: 291). Both examples can be linked with the agenda setting theory (in terms of 'deliberately distorting what we see in the service of another agenda', and in terms of 'shaping the Arab agenda'), thus being a relevant theory to be used in my study.

Having examined the Syrian uprising and Bahraini uprising coverages respectively, this previous study by Abdul-Nabi suggests that peace journalism might have had a de-escalating effect on the conflicts had it been implemented, “by mentioning the history and context, presenting different analyses, opinions, alternatives and peace initiatives as well as giving

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\(^7\) See reference in (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 292ff).
\(^8\) See reference in (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 292ff).
“voice to the voiceless” (2015:291); nonetheless, what the coverage contained was the contrary, containing mostly – if not only – war journalism when covering the chemical attack in Syria in August 2013.

2.2 Theoretical framework

In a theory using study, the case is the one to be emphasised, as with this study, differing it from a theory testing study that emphasises the theory that is used, making the object of study the primary focus and the theory secondary in the concept of theory using (Esaiasson et al 2007: 43, 100). What also differs the two is the level of which the results in the study can be generalised: a study that is theory using will most likely provide results that answer the research questions that are proposed, but will not necessarily serve as an answer that can be applied on other studies if even of a similar kind, since each case is different from another and the results concern only a particular case, making the results from a theory testing study easier to generalise as it focuses on an already existent theory – such as realism or liberalism – and tests it on the case. Such theories are used not only in one study but in many other studies, hence the ability of generalising the results given (2007: 100); however, it is not suitable here as this study focuses on a particular case, in attempt to explain what happened, rather than the theory that will be used. Nonetheless, each study needs to be rooted in a certain theory, with this study being no exception to this scientific criterion. Theories are needed in order to work with the research problem as well as being able to answer the research question(s) that will fulfil the aim of a study.

The theory of agenda setting is the one to be used for this study. It was developed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw 1993: 59), rooted from Walter Lippmann’s book Public Opinion in 1922 that attempted to explain the effect of media that create a specific image of how things are, hence how things should be apprehended. In chapter one of his book, Lippmann gave an example about individuals from two sides that were enemies in a war; however, it was unbeknownst to them as they were living on an island where no media reached them:

There was an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. (…) They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of
them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies. (Lippmann 1922: 1).

Considering this example, those individuals of different nationalities had created an image of what was reality based solely on the environment around them as they, for six weeks, could not be reached by anything from outside the island. With no outside effect – nobody telling them any events – this remained their reality until they were reached with the news telling them of the war that involved Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans. Consequently, what was being told in the news was now their new reality, as their reality was no longer based on their environment but on what they were being told, apprehending this to be their environment despite the past six weeks where they – as Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans – had been living together as friends. Suddenly, their reality was changed, and they believed it.

In the early years, the theory circulated around studying who is setting the public agenda as well as studying the conditions in which the public agenda is being set (McCombs & Shaw 1993: 60). Having evolved, it also takes under consideration questions such as 'Who is setting the agenda of the media?' (1993: 60).

This is described as a theory that whatever event that media prioritises is what journalists individually perceive as important, this way influenced to consider a certain event as more important than other, setting the agenda on what the society should be concerned; furthermore, what influences journalists – and differently per individual – are aspects such as "media routines, organizational sociology (both internal and external to news organizations), and ideology, all in addition to individual differences among journalists." (1993: 60f). Subsequently, it affects the public opinion in terms of what and how to think about an object (1993: 62).

Elaborating further on the assertion of the agenda setting theory, its fundamental assertion is that "the news tells us what to think about." (1993: 62); however, with the theory having evolved, it also has the assertion that "the news also tells us how to think about it." (1993: 62).

Citing McCombs and Shaw, they explain this theory as "a theory about the transfer of salience, both the salience of objects and the salience of their attributes." (1993: 62). Objects are for instance events or personalities (1993: 62). The theory of agenda setting defines certain criteria to be linked to "audience responses to specific aspects of media content – (...) the structural biases of journalism" (1993: 61), those being "the salience of issues, overall salience of politics, and the salience of particular perspectives on the topics of the day."
(1993: 61). In other words, when not reached by the certain image which media provides of an event, people react differently in political events than to what they are supposed to react when being told this image. Media coverages might, therefore, be conflated with political meanings in terms of manifested messages and latent messages in their contents, for instance as the news coverages could aim (or avoid to aim) the attention on specific attributes in the event that is being covered (1993: 62).

Also, it is common knowledge that media sources are, in our contemporary society, being able to reach out to many people considering today’s technology. All together, this could mean that media sources can shape the public opinion by shaping the agenda – with or without it being intentional. This theory can, therefore, be considered important in social science and political science, for instance political communication being an area which the theory can be applied on, and not only on media communication.

The theory of agenda setting is relevant in this case as the approach here is one where the way media is portraying the sides involved in the intra-Syrian peace negotiations is examined. In summary, to set the agenda on what the society should be concerned might have a political reason and hence a political meaning. This theory will be used when interpreting texts that portray the Syrian government and the opposition.

3. Delimitating the study

3.1 The choice of media source to be examined

For the examination, I have chosen al-Jazeera as the media source to be examined.

Why choosing this media source in particular? The choice is rooted in the fact that channel al-Jazeera is well-known worldwide and is possibly the most influential news channel in the Arab world reaching out to tens of millions of viewers and readers. Choosing a primary source that was present in Geneva during the peace negotiations allows an examination that brings us closer to the object of study (the original texts about what is in and around the negotiations) in accordance with the definition of interpretation, further described in chapter 4 about the methodological approach.

Motivating the choice of this media source is based on two criteria, namely that it is related to one of the sides in the Syrian war and has been reporting actively about the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva. Al-Jazeera has been present during the rounds of the peace talks, allowing there to
be written material available to analyse. Considering the relation to each side, apart from al-Jazeera already being known as pro-opposition promoting the ‘uprising’, it is reasonable to assume that it is somehow related to that side when checking its background.

Al-Jazeera was founded in 1996 by the Qatari emir of that time and is thereby based in the State of Qatar. Adding to this common knowledge is the fact that Qatar is known to have supported the opposition side in the Syrian war ever since the war began (Fielding Smith & Khalaf, 2013). With this media source being leading reporters of the war ever since its start, it is worth noticing that also ever since the beginning of the war al-Jazeera has been accused by pro-government media to be fabricating some of its news about the uprising (another terminology referring to the Syrian war) and filming them in Qatar while claiming they are from Syrian cities (Dunham, 2011). In previous studies, Abdul-Nabi’s study cites that scholars have acknowledged al-Jazeera as unable to be “fully independent in its coverage” from the ruling royal family of Qatar, for instance when covering the war in Syria (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 272), and the study also mentions al-Jazeera to have a “catalytic role” in the so-called Arab Spring (2015: 271f).

3.2 Delimitation and the reason behind it

The delimitation in this study is a delimitation of the sides in the war, of the events, and of media sources to be examined. In this study, I narrow down the sides in the Syrian war into two sides. The sides of the war will be roughly defined as 'government' and 'opposition'. This is a much simplified version of the sides involved in the complicated Syrian war, as for politically and militarily those two sides are divided into several actors (supporting countries, armed groups, allies etc.). Also, one could see a third side, apart from the government side and the opposition side, in this war such as ISIS which media has reported both sides to have fought against them, or the Kurds who both sides claim to have on their side. As previously mentioned, this war is complicated – the more you get into the depth of its arrangement the more actors you discover to be involved. Simplifying it into two sides is only a rough division, not a detailed and complete description of reality; however, in this examination it is kept plain in order to simplify the apprehension for the readers. I consider a more detailed description of the large number of components in the war to be irrelevant for this study since the examination will focus on how the government and the opposition are portrayed in texts in accordance with the research questions formulated from the aim.
The war in Syria began in 2011 – including all years and all events here is by all means impossible to perform. By delimiting, the examination becomes performable in terms of size, resources, and time available. The first step in delimiting is to focus on one specific event, and step two is to specify a time period to be examined closer.

Some events have been given more attention to than other in media considering the Syrian war, for instance the offensive in Aleppo in the end of 2016, the offensive in Eastern Ghouta in the outskirts of Damascus earlier this year, the suspected use of chemical weapons in several occasions, and the peace talks. The event to be focused on here is specifically the peace talks that have been taking place in Geneva, led by the United Nations, between the sides involved in the war. These talks are officially known as the intra-Syrian peace negotiations. The first three rounds are the ones to be examined. Why these rounds in particular is based on the motivation that they cover a four-year period of time, between 2012-2016, with it being interesting to see whether there has been some kind of change or difference in the coverage in the way they have been portrayed during those years. There is more or less a two-year long break between each round of the three, the first round taking place in 2012, the second in 2014, and the third in 2016. Additionally, all rounds cannot be examined here as the length of this study is not large enough to cover them considering the fact that the peace negotiations had reached its eighth round by the end of 2017.

Based on the arrangement in the Geneva peace negotiations, ‘opposition’ will in this study be referring to the HNC delegation that attended the third round of the peace negotiations, and the Syrian National Coalition delegation that attended the second round.

Why is this event – the intra-Syrian negotiations – relevant? The point of having these talks is, as clearly expressed in the name, for the Syrian sides to negotiate in order to achieve peace the country. It is a peaceful solution; however, it has been a complicated process until today. Also, it is one of few propositions for a political solution rather than a military solution such as interventions which could very well increase the bloodshed rather than end it as seen by previous interventions in Syria so far – e.g. the US-led international Coalition’s air raids with many reported civilian victims according to government sources (SANA, 2018), and the Russian intervention which is in accordance with the Syrian government’s approval yet whose raids have been accused by opposition sources to be claiming civilian lives (SOHR, 2016). EU members of the Security Council released a statement underlining the importance of a political solution to the war through dialog (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2018).
4. Methodological approach

Before choosing an appropriate method for this study, I define the study as a theory using one. A theory using study leans onto existing literature to define concepts, thereby constructing a theoretical framework for the examination. This is what makes it possible for other students or researchers to redo the same examination if wanting to control or understand, for instance, how results were reached to and how conclusions were drawn, this process being called intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity in a study means it is transparent, as well objective and independent from the author’s opinion (Esaiasson 2007: 24). Theory using studies want to know more about the object of study: by approaching material which media sources provide, it is possible to know more through interpretation – interpreting the texts. This will be further developed in subchapter 4.1.

Using the description made by Esaiasson et al for the concept of theory using (2007: 99), the cornerstones that form the base for this concept are:

![Diagram](Esaiasson et al 2007: 99)

**Scientific relevance**

This research problem to be examined could be considered as contributing to the field of political science by increasing the understanding of something that could have consequences on both people and countries (Esaiasson 2007: 31f). Exemplifying such research problems, they mention that such studies should be useful for society (2007: 32), which I reckon this study is since manifested or latent political meanings might be aimed at components of the
society. With this study being qualitative, it is perhaps not easy to generalise the results and apply them on other cases; however, being a qualitative study is what allows a deeper analysis of the texts. Had this examination been performed quantitatively, measured in numbers, generalisation could have been more possible.

4.1 Interpretive political science

Political science involves several methods. Counting methods are related to quantitative studies, whilst methods of comparing are related to comparative studies, and so on. There is also what is called interpretive political science, to understand politics through interpretation. The difference between a manifested meaning and a latent meaning is not always clear; nonetheless, deeper interpretation is needed in order to identify the latent meaning (Esaiasson et al 2007: 250). Interpretation could be considered as two processes that are related: a) a whole text is interpreted through the parts it consists of, b) parts of a text need to be interpreted in accordance with the whole text that connects them together (2007: 252).

Esaiasson et al also emphasise what they call ‘a generous interpretation’, meaning that one should assume a text’s contents involves a meaning, or position, worth taking seriously (2007: 252). Additionally, even if interpretation in this case involves whole texts, the choice of words in the text remains important to interpret as the same word might mean differently – e.g something positive or something negative – depending on how it is being used (2007: 253). Such words have a broad definition, as for the word ‘democracy’ for instance, hence the possibility to be used differently.

Interpretation is defined as something which is done by approaching the object of study with the aim to increase understanding for the specific phenomenon rather than for the causation (Esaiasson 2007: 249). Textual analytic studies and interpretation is, thereby, clearly related, as for in this case. The study being textual analytic is a more suitable methodological approach, considering that examining the texts and interpreting them is what will give data to the examination, which will answer the research questions. Analysing the contents of the texts is the purpose rather than analysing the media source itself.

Textual analysis
For students and researchers that aim to analyse newspapers, government reports etc, textual analysis becomes a suitable method as it focuses on the text and turns it into an information source (Halperin & Heath 2012: 309). Reciting the political scientists Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath, they explain that “growing awareness of the importance of language and meaning for political analysis and of the power of the mass media has produced a dramatic upsurge of interest in textual analysis (...)” (2012: 309). It is the importance of language and meaning for political analysis (seen in the texts), and the power of media (the producers of the texts) that this study intends to focus on when examining various texts. Esaiasson et al describe qualitative textual analysis to be a suitable method for handling several recording units (in this case, several texts) as it treats all units as equal in importance, and this method is used to define parts of the contents that are relevant to the study while taking the contents as well as the whole text and the context in which the text was written under consideration (2007: 237).

**Content analysis**

The meaning of this particular method of textual analysis is closely related to its name. With content analysis, one focuses on the contents of the text itself. Defining what the contents are is slightly different in quantitative and qualitative studies respectively – quantitatively focusing on e.g. the frequency of words, or qualitatively identifying how certain things are being presented and represented. Halperin and Heath use the example of racism to exemplify qualitative content analysis, suggesting the use of this method to identify representations of racism by studying media contents, literature etc. of how people of different skin colour or different ethnic origin are portrayed (Halperin & Heath 2012: 310). Also, Halperin and Heath refer to a similar study made by Linz and Dixon, who observe that people of white skin colour are seen more often as victims than those of black skin colour who are more often those who break the law (2012: 310). For this study, I intend to use the qualitative content analysis, inspired by Halperin and Heath’s example of Linz and Dixon.

Going further into when content analysis is used, official documents and documents of personal and cultural kind are most commonly the texts to be analysed; this method tends to be used when studying (news) media, (election) manifestos etc. (2012: 318). In this study, the texts are articles, which belong to the category of cultural documents.
Moving onto why content analysis is useful when other methods might not be, is for instance because of what Halperin and Heath call the interview effect – that some people tend to alter what they say to match what is expected of them from the person interviewing them or in terms of what is satisfactory socially (2012: 318), leading to the risk of bias. As the texts are written, this problem is minimised or avoided.

The object of study is, therefore, the texts (from media source). How to study this is by examining their texts for latent meaning to be interpreted, using textual analysis, since it is important that I get deep into the texts, with the analysis linking back to the research questions and answering them.

Using content analysis qualitatively is done when the meaning behind the texts to be examined lies between the lines (Halperin & Heath 2012: 319). This is what is called the latent content of the text, with latent being the concealed meaning inside, and maybe even around, the words and expressions used in the text. Here, the strength of this method is that it enables an examination of the latent meaning within the texts while simultaneously taking under consideration the larger context in which these were made, that is to say the Syrian war. “Qualitative content analysis assumes that it is possible to expose the meanings, motives, and purposes embedded within the text (…) the context in which texts are produced, and better able to tell us about meanings, norms, values, motives, and purposes.” (2012: 319). A potential weakness with content analysis could, however, be that some important phrases might accidently be overlooked considering that several texts are to be examined; additionally, it relies on interpretation, which could differ from one person to another.

Clarifying the circumstances concerning the texts that are to be examined, they are all in English and need not be translated before being analysed. I choose to go this way, using al-Jazeera English, in order to gain access to texts from primary sources about the Syrian war and the peace negotiations, yet in English instead of Arabic. The translation from Arabic to English risks being considered a subjective interpretation, and would that be the case then the contents of the texts risks to get changed.

4.2 Validity and reliability

Knowing that the method must be a suitable one to be used to answer the research questions and fulfil the aim, there are also the aspects of validity and reliability to think about. Having empirical evidence that is plausible is what makes a study reliable and valid (Halperin &
Heath 2012: 327f). Therefore, it is important to always explain all parts of the study, as well as explaining the results and analysis comprehensively to others who are reading. Details concerning the content analysis, such as the articles that are being used, must be made available to increase readers’ understanding in how the examination led to the particular results, analysis, and conclusions. (2012: 328). Leaving out such details would raise questions such as ‘where did these results come from?’ and ‘what are the conclusions based on?’ The entire study must be transparent for others to follow, understand, and even repeat if wishing to do so.

Do I measure what I really aim to measure; do the research questions or the variables measure this? This is something to think about throughout the examination in order to for it to be valid.

In textual analysis, and particularly content analysis, reliability is concerned with being objective when analysing and interpreting a text, and avoiding the use of expressions that could have several meanings in the analysis. There is no room for any unclearness, and consistency is the core of reliability.

5. Material

Knowing which method to use and how to delimit the research problem, it’s now time to switch over and view the material which is to be used for the examination. The number of texts to be examined are six texts. These are written texts in terms of articles and in-depth articles, talking about the circumstances in or around the peace negotiations, found on the channel’s official website.

The reason as to why six texts will be examined and not more is because of the fact that the available time to perform this study is limited; therefore, I deem that including a larger number of texts would pose a risk of causing a less accurate and thorough analysis of each text, as well as a risk of not finishing within the timeframe of this study. Not choosing less than six texts is based on the assumption that, for instance, one or two texts would mean not many enough to analyse and draw conclusions. Logically it should take more than one or two texts to examine three rounds of the peace negotiations – drawing conclusions from very few texts could become an issue since the base of the analysis would be weak. Ultimately, the number of texts used is not as important as using texts that actually talk about circumstances in or around the peace negotiations. As Halperin & Heath put it, it is important to distinguish what documents serve as relevant material to what is supposed to be examined (2012: 319).
In accordance with validity and reliability, I go through the process of choosing material below. Doing this enables others to repeat this examination if wanting to.

To avoid selection bias in terms of deliberately choosing material that will confirm my study, I used the result list given when making a google search. With two of the research questions being ‘How is the opposition portrayed as a political actor?’ and ‘How is the government portrayed as a political actor?’, the absence of the two Syrian sides in Geneva 1 makes it less relevant to the aim of the study to examine texts from that first round. Additionally, it is difficult to find texts about Geneva 1 dated from around June 2012 (when the meeting took place) from al-Jazeera using the google search words ‘al-Jazeera English Syria Geneva 2012’. The search results give one article from 2012 in the first (google result) page for al-Jazeera.

Considering Geneva 2, the first step was to make a search using the words ‘al-Jazeera English Syria Geneva 2014’ and ‘al-Jazeera English Syria Geneva 2’. These search words provide results from 2014, which is the year when the second round took place, in English. Secondly, three articles were chosen from the results given. The reason to that is that I chose articles that are as high up as possible on the result list of the google search; however, I could not only choose the first ones on top because it is crucial that I take dates under consideration if wanting the articles to be close to when the negotiations took place (the first ones could be referring to Geneva 2 but have a date that is much later than 2014). Also, while looking into the background of the peace negotiations, I came across another article from al-Jazeera – interviewing a Syrian TV reporter about Geneva 2. The choice being a mixture of articles and in-depth articles gives a broader insight in the media texts, allowing various kinds of articles to be included in the examination – one kind of article might perhaps contain more of a political meaning than the other.

Choosing texts from al-Jazeera for the third round was done in the same way as with the second round, apart from changing ‘2014’ to ‘2016’.

Concerning all the chosen articles for the rounds, they illustrate the circumstances around the peace negotiations. Awaiting the second and the third round of the peace negotiations, there has been a debate whether the rounds will actually take place and whether the delegations, especially the opposition’s delegation, will agree to participate as well as the preconditions that the delegations set in order to come. The chosen articles illustrate these circumstances.

Why choosing both news articles and in-depth articles? Apart from it providing more material, choosing two kinds of articles considers a broader aspect of the object of study in
this case. It might add something to the study – latent political meaning could potentially be identified in all kinds of texts, and I reason that maybe one of the two text forms might differ having either clearer or less clear political meaning. Some might be in the latent meaning while other might be explicitly written. In other words, my reason to (sometimes) combine news articles and in-depth articles is that they complete each other as well as it allows the journalist’s opinion to emerge, showing that he or she is an active part of the text like Mamdani wrote in his work about journalism in conflict (Orgeret & Tayeebwa eds. 2016: 11).

**List of material**

Having reflected on the material, how they were found and why they were chosen, the material is listed below. The list is completed with dates and where they have been retrieved from.

For round one of the peace negotiations:

- “Syria transition plan denounced by both sides”, article from al-Jazeera website, July 1st 2012.

For round two of the negotiations:

- “Syria main opposition to attend Geneva talks”, article from al-Jazeera website, January 19th 2014.
- “Explaining the Geneva II peace talks on Syria”, in-depth article from al-Jazeera website, January 19th 2014.
- “A state news anchor’s take on the Syria war”, in-depth article from al-Jazeera website, January 30th 2014.

For round three:

- “Syria opposition threatens to walk out of Geneva talks”, article from al-Jazeera website, February 2nd 2016.

**6. Performing the examination**
The examination is performed in accordance with Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath´s four steps of performing a content analysis. In the four steps which they suggest, they ask one question for each step:

1. “What set of documents is germane to research question, and what sample from this set will you analyse?” (2012: 320).
4. “How will you identify, and signal the presence in your recording units of, the categories you are looking for?” (2012: 322).

Answering these questions keeps the examination in the right direction and forbids it from straying away to other aspects that does not interest this study.

Firstly, I have chosen the kind of texts I shall examine and how many of these that are to be examined, as previously presented in chapter 5 about material. I reckon the choice to be well considered as the articles are relevant to the research questions, and also because Halperin and Heath write that the chosen textual data is allowed to consist of “one particular text type (…) or include texts belonging to different text types” (2012: 320). This should mean that using two kinds of articles would not cause problems to the study. Additionally, it is acceptable that the texts have the same writer or different writers (2012: 320), which is the case with the material used here.

Secondly, knowing what I examine the texts for – (for political meaning) – I define both the manifested and latent meanings to be important in the chosen texts. Thirdly, I select the segments to be analysed. These segments are called the recording unit. In content analysis, the recording units that are used are words, sentences, themes, whole texts, or a character (2012: 321). In this case, the recording unit will be whole texts. In other words, as it is a qualitative analysis, I shall look into the texts in whole and not the frequency of particular words. The recording unit could have been paragraphs, but I choose whole texts because in this case it is important to consider the larger context. Looking into how certain words are being used will be actual for this examination; however, it will not be used for every article, thus not selecting words as the recording unit.

As a fourth step, I identify the latent political meaning I am looking for in the texts by identifying the manifested political meaning and interpreting the written contents, in
accordance with interpretive political science (described in subchapter 4.1).

7. Analysis

Halperin and Heath describe the analysis as the part where it is about “making sense and attaching meaning to the data we have gathered, and applying the resulting knowledge to our research question.” (Halperin & Heath 2012: 326). This will be divided into two steps: step one being the first half of what Halperin and Heath instruct, namely to make sense of the gathered data as well as attach meaning to it. In accordance with this, I have looked into the gathered data for patterns that are relevant to the study.

In the analysis, I begin with finding patterns as well as describing the contents of the text. Then, latent political meaning from between the lines is attached to the data, and this data is linked to the events surrounding the texts which is the context in which each text was written.

7.1 Analysing the texts

Text 1: “Syria transition plan denounced by both sides” (al-Jazeera, 2012)

Patterns of manifested political meaning in the text:

- No role for the president – the article is clear that this is what all the western countries think as well as the opposition and even the Geneva 1 action group had Russia and China not stood in the way. Quoting the article, it says “Moscow and Beijing, which have twice blocked UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, signed up to the final agreement that did not make any explicit call for Assad to cede power.”

- The (Syrian) people do not want the president – in the article, the opposition is using particularly strong vocabulary to describe the person himself rather than just saying his name; the opposition is talking in the name of the people; the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations is saying that the Syrian people would not select “people with blood on their hands”.

- Both sides are denouncing the Geneva 1 transition plan – the article tells that the opposition as well as the government and the government allies reckon the plan to be no good for Syria; with both sides finally agreeing on something (namely that both sides denounce the transition plan), it means that this is really a bad plan presented.
Attaching latent meaning to the data:

- The correct thing that should happen is that the president should step down – one of the patterns in the text is that everyone thinks there is no role for the Syrian president, except for Russia and China who both have blocked UN resolutions about the Syrian war two times before. Attaching meaning to this, one considers that since the only two who do not think the same are also the ones to have raised their veto hindering the UN resolutions, making them antagonists as the resolutions might e.g. have helped the Syrian people – their opinion is not the correct one.

- It is certain that the Joint Special Envoy meant the president when referring to some with blood on their hands – another of the patterns in the text is that the article seems certain that the meaning behind this is the government side. Attaching meaning to this, it means that it cannot be the rebels who are also engaged in fighting and shelling places in Syria, despite that all sides involved in the battlefield will naturally have ‘blood on their hands’.

- The opposition is right to denounce the transition plan – another pattern is that the article tells that both sides denounce, yet the opposition side’s denouncing gets explained, whereas the government side and their allies get one sentence where they express themselves. Attaching meaning to this could be that they should not be blamed for denouncing because this is why they denounce, read about the plan and their explanation and it will be understandable that the opposition is right to denounce the plan. In the same article, the government explains denouncing the plan only by saying “The agreement of the task force on Syria in Geneva on Saturday resembles an enlarged meeting of the UN Security Council where the positions of participants remained the same”, whereas their Iranian ally says nothing more than “This meeting was unsuccessful… because Syria was not present and some influential nations were not present”.

Linking the data to the events:

- The Syrian war is an uprising in the eyes of the opposition, they want to overthrow the president and his regime (especially the president considering how they even call the Syrian government by his name, ‘the Assad regime’). The Geneva 1 communiqué contains a transition plan decided on by the participants. In the later rounds of the peace negotiations it becomes clear that the opposition prioritises political transition;
however, denouncing this transition plan is likely to be because it did not exclude current members of the government and, above all, it did not explicitly say that the president must step down (al-Jazeera, 2012). In other words, the Geneva 1 did and did not give the opposition what they want.

Text 2: “Syria main opposition to attend Geneva talks” (al-Jazeera c, 2014)

Patterns of manifested political meaning in the text:

- The opposition is to participate – the article gives the good news that the opposition side will participate in the peace negotiations despite it being unclear for long whether they would or not, and despite the difficulties they have had to unify themselves.

Attaching latent meaning to the data:

- The opposition finally agrees to participate – attaching meaning to this is that they agree for the people’s sake. They are going through with this, despite difficulties to unite, because the people and Syria come first. Quoting the article, it says “Jarba9 said the opposition was going to the talks with the head held high, ‘We are supported and relying on people who are facing many atrocities that are unprecedented in history,’ he added.’ The difficulties to unify themselves were overcome for the people to get rid of the president. Attaching meaning to why some of the opposition oppose to attend the peace negotiation in Geneva, it could be because they consider the rebels fighting for a great cause that cannot be compromised. “Many Coalition members were hesitant to attend a conference that (…) will burn the last shred of credibility the group has with powerful rebels on the ground, who reject the talks.” it says in the text.

Linking the data to the events:

- The reason behind the uncleanness of whether the opposition was to participate or not could be because of the Western countries as well as Arab countries wanting them to participate and the rebels not wanting them to participate. Quoting the article, it says “The secret ballot was a result of pressure from Western and Arab sponsors of the opposition.” Therefore, some opposition members voting ‘yes’ for participation and others voting ‘no’ could be that they want to maintain both the West/ some Arab

9 Ahmad Jarba was the head of the Syrian National Coalition, the opposition attending the second round of the peace negotiations, in 2014.
countries and the rebels on their side, considering that those Western countries and
Arab countries that are pushing them to participate support them politically and the
rebel groups are doing the fighting on the ground against the government forces.
Logically, the opposition’s existence would be difficult without both parts.

Text 3: “Explaining the Geneva II peace talks on Syria” (al-Jazeera b, 2014)

Patterns of manifested political meaning in the text:

- The opposition is given more attention to than the government – in the article, more
  than twice as much space in the text is given to the opposition compared to the space
  that the government gets.
- Rebel groups are refusing the second round of the peace negotiations.
- The role of the president – the opposition wants him to step down.
- The opposition delegation has a wide representation – in the article, the delegation is
  described as representing the people by having members from various groups and
  ethnicities, whereas the government delegation is described as representing the
  government only.
- The opposition delegation has conditions, which are named in the article; the
  government delegation does not have that.

Attaching latent meaning to the data:

- That the opposition is given more attention makes them more relevant than the
  government. Logically, had they not mattered more, they would not have got this
  much space and attention.
- The rebels are fighting for a great cause and therefore refuse the second round of the
  peace negotiations, where they have to communicate with the evil they are fighting.
  The article quotes the leader of the Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda (Green,
  2013), saying “Those taking part in the conference do not represent the people who
  sacrificed and shed blood”, which might be explaining the ‘great cause’.
- Concerning the roll of the president, if the second round were to fail despite UN’s Ban
  Ki-Moon calling it “unforgivable not to seize this opportunity to end the war” (al-
  Jazeera b, 2014), it would be the president’s fault for preferring not to step down
  instead of preferring to end the war for the people’s sake.
The opposition delegation has conditions such as releasing prisoners, especially women prisoners, and aid reaching besieged areas—heroic conditions that emphasise people’s rights, and which if the second round of the peace negotiations fails means that the government did not fulfil them. In its turn, the government delegation does not have these conditions because the only condition it cares about is the president staying. However, the article does not mention why the government delegation does not have preconditions to attend, only that it does not accept the opposition’s demand that the president must step down: it could be that the president’s stay is unnegotiable rather than a condition, and the government delegation is avoiding preconditions that could ruin the peace negotiations, which in itself might make this delegation also heroic since not wanting to put sticks in the wheels of the peace negotiations has to be a step in the right direction (to achieve peace in Syria).

Linking the data to the events:

As the number of victims in the war are increasing, so is the pressure\textsuperscript{10} to achieve peace and major world powers have become convinced that there is no other solution than a political one (al-Jazeera b, 2014), with US and Russia supporting one side each. Maybe that could explain that both sides agreed to attend the second round; however, attending does not mean the end of the war, they could attend with conditions (which the opposition delegation did) and so on.

Text 4: “A state news anchor’s take on the Syria war” (al-Jazeera a, 2014)

Patterns of manifested political meaning in the text:

The article quotes criticism aimed at the opposition, yet hints at this criticism being weird: “Can you tell me why the armed groups [you support] are holding women and children hostage in Homs?” she yells to an opposition spokesman, referring to the city where rebel-held areas have been besieged by government troops for 18 months.”, and “Moualla wants those people to be brought to justice, just like the opposition wants Assad and his top generals to be tried for crimes against humanity.” adds criticism to what she says.

\textsuperscript{10} The article quotes the British minister of state for foreign affairs saying “There is a binary choice here (...) You either put pressure on them and try to have a peace agreement in Geneva. Or you do not bother and the fighting continues...”.
The article balances what the Syrian TV anchor says about the rebels with how one could say the same about the SAA and the government.

Attaching latent meaning to the data:

- The anchor’s view is, surprisingly, added to the article despite her views being pro-government. This article bothers to do so even though other articles do not agree with the view she is presenting. Doing this adds tolerance to al-Jazeera’s news, yet the hints of criticism that argue back at the Syrian TV anchor’s words despite that could be linked to what Conboy explains about arguments in news reporting: “arguments are the statements and strategies which a writer or speaker uses to persuade someone of the validity of their position. Much argumentation within the news media (…) is in fact part of the overall position of the news medium within which it is located.” (Conboy 2007: 79). Also, Conboy says that different opinions are added in order to give an impression that “a liberal tolerance of a range of viewpoints is accepted” (2007: 79).

Linking the data to the events:

- There are sides in the war and those disagree on who are the protagonists and who are the antagonists, as clearly viewed in this text.

Text 5: “Syria opposition threatens to walk out of Geneva talks” (al-Jazeera b, 2016)

Patterns of manifested political meaning in the text:

- There is a question mark concerning the opposition’s participation in the third round of the peace negotiations.
- The opposition has conditions in order to participate.
- The opposition is blaming the government before the start of the third round.
- Fighting on the ground continues despite the third round of the peace negotiations, with attacks from the government side.

Attaching latent meaning to the data:

- In the article, the opposition mentions the people several times, giving the impression that they are speaking in the name of the people, although one of the opposition
members say in the article “(...) we are here to really find a solution for all Syrians no matter what side they are on”, meaning that not all people are on the opposition side.

• (The opposition) Having these particular conditions, that are more of human rights conditions rather than conditions that obstacle the peace negotiations, makes it the government’s fault if the third round were to fail because of the conditions being unfulfilled. Quoting the article, it says “HNC is threatening to pull out of the UN-sponsored peace talks if what it called the ‘crimes’ of Assad’s government persist. (...) the HNC would discuss with de Mistura on Sunday its conditions for joining the negotiations, which include the government agreeing to lift sieges on opposition-held areas and stop shelling them and agreeing to release prisoners.”

Linking the data to the events:

• Fighting on the ground continues, and, understandably, there is a risk of the peace negotiations falling apart because of that. The siege of Madaya in Damascus countryside and the starvation that the inhabitants there are suffering from is mentioned in the article; however, it does not mention anything about areas that are besieged by the opposition such as Kefraya or Fou’a in the Idlib province (Aboufadel b, 2015), or areas that are besieged by ISIS such as Deir Ezzor (JFL 2016: 7).

Text 6: “Surge of clashes in Syria on eve of Geneva peace talks” (al-Jazeera a, 2016)

Patterns of manifested political meaning in the text:

• The ceasefire in Syria, reached in February 2016\(^{11}\), is near to fall apart – the reason to that is particularly the fighting in northern Aleppo.
• Rebels are under attack in the ceasefire.
• The fate of the president is brought up again.

Attaching latent meaning to the data:

• Logically, what gives legitimacy to one side is the support of the people, yet what the article is telling is who are those that consider the Syrian parliament election to be

\(^{11}\) The ceasefire was announced by Russia and the United States in February 22\(^{nd}\) 2016 (US Embassy in Syria, 2016).
illegitimate (namely the opposition and the UN) rather than telling what the people think (e.g. the expected voter turnout).

- The ceasefire is falling apart although the article says that northern Aleppo is where the Nusra Front is present – why applying so much worry to the text that the ceasefire is falling apart if the agreement concerning the ceasefire excludes the Nusra Front and ISIS\(^{12}\)? In other words, the ceasefire allows launching attacks against these two groups. The article mentions the US fearing that it might spread to the “moderate rebels”; however, the article does not tell who these moderate rebels are. Furthermore, the article tells about rebel groups that are included in the ceasefire being under attack despite the ceasefire, because the Nusra Front is allied with them in some areas. This gives an ambiguous meaning – are they moderate rebels or allied with the extremist Front; are the moderate rebels allied with the Nusra Front?

Quoting the article, it says “concern has been mounting that a spike in violence focused mainly in Aleppo province (...) is putting intense strain on the ceasefire. Pro-government forces were on Tuesday pressing an advance against the town of Al-Eis, held by fighters from al-Qaeda´ s local affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, and allied rebels (...) Al-Nusra and (ISIS) were excluded from the ceasefire but, complicating matters, in some areas the al-Qaeda fighters are allied with rebels covered by the truce.”

- The fate of the president is an obstacle in the peace negotiations, again, after two years from the second round. The meaning could be that it will remain an obstacle; however, one cannot ignore the fact that it has been an obstacle for so long, meaning that those who are setting conditions that involve the president in the peace negotiations are actually locking the entire peace process. Taking this meaning further, it could continue to obstruct the future rounds of the peace negotiations, meaning that peace might not be achieved and the war will continue as it has for several years.

Linking the data to the events:

- Linking to the events, the fighting in northern Aleppo – which the article talks about – is an SAA offensive that was launched two months before this article was written, to reclaim the northern part of Aleppo province together with the government allies (Aboufadel, 2016), simultaneous to an offensive that was launched by the YPG in the

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\(^{12}\) The ceasefire does not include ISIS and the Nusra Front (US Embassy in Syria, 2016).
nearby areas (Tomson, 2016), both aiming to cut off the supply routes between the rebel groups/ Nusra Front and Turkey. Linking this to the peace negotiations may be a question of the rebels risking to lose this large area, and thereby the opposition would lose a large area which it could represent in the rounds of the peace negotiations. The opposition need to maintain an existence on the Syrian ground in order to negotiate. Going further with this scenario, the opposition’s presence in the intra-Syrian negotiations might end up being questioned in terms of who the opposition is representing on the ground if losing more areas, adding to the fact that the opposition has had a hard time unifying as well as the knowledge from text 3 that it does not have the support of all rebel groups that are fighting on the ground. Meanwhile, the government clearly exists on the ground in terms of the SAA and are, before and during that period13, reclaiming more areas and even holding parliamentary elections.

7.2 Link to the research questions

Having examined the texts, the analysis should be linked to the research questions in order to answer them. The research questions were ‘how is the opposition portrayed as a political actor?’, ‘how is the government portrayed as a political actor?’, and ‘how could these portraits be explained?’. “(...) applying the resulting knowledge to our research question” as Halperin and Heath instruct (2012: 326) is what will now be done, fulfilling step two of the analysis which is the second half of Halperin and Heath´s instruction earlier mentioned in the beginning of the analysis on page 21.

How is the opposition portrayed as a political actor?

In the texts, the opposition is predominantly portrayed in a particular way, one that portrays them as those who represent the people. This is done, for instance, by describing in text 3 the wide representation of groups and ethnicities which the opposition delegation has in the second round of the peace negotiations. Similar to this, it is not mentioned that in the third round the government delegation has a wide representation in terms of the majority of their

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13 Battle map of Syria during December 2015 shows SAA controlled areas are more than the areas controlled by rebel groups, despite parts of Aleppo province being under rebel control (Aboufadel a, 2015).
members being from the Syrian People’s Assembly, one of them also being of Syrian-Kurdish origin.\footnote{Mr Omar Osi, member of the Syrian People’s Assembly since 2012 (Syrian People’s Assembly, 2016), and member of the government delegation in the third round of the peace negotiations (ORTAS, 2016).}

Considering the contents of the texts, one could say that two units (the regime and the people) are portrayed, which oppose each other. The people are emphasised as oppressed while thinking of the regime unit as evil, hence it is possible to see a pattern that the opposition represents the people whilst the government is portrayed as the cause of people’s misery. Texts 1, 2, 5, and 6, despite being about the peace negotiations, bring up events from the context (the war in Syria) and several times they mention the attacks performed by the government side, as well as supposed brutalities from the government side, portraying them as evil without mentioning the word ‘evil’ (one of several examples being “Opposition delegates say they will leave if government does not lift sieges on rebel-held areas and stop rocket attacks.”, citing text 5). As it is a war going on, logic suggests that both sides are engaging themselves in battle (which various sources also confirm), yet al-Jazeera’s texts include very little about attacks made by the opposition side (the rebel groups).

Therein includes nothing that questions the moderate opposition (how moderate they actually are, and how to distinguish them from extremists), despite that parts of the contents of the texts that describe them is potentially linking them to terrorist groups. In text 6, it says that “concern has been mounting that a spike in violence focused mainly in Aleppo province (...) is putting intense strain on the ceasefire. Pro-government forces were (...) pressing an advance against the town of Al-Eis, held by fighters from al-Qaeda’s local affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, and allied rebels (...) Al-Nusra and (ISIS) were excluded from the ceasefire but, complicating matters, in some areas the al-Qaeda fighters are allied with rebels covered by the truce.” As previously mentioned in the analysis, the article does not tell who these moderate rebels are, only that rebel groups are under attack because the Nusra Front is allied with them in some areas. What does this actually tell about the moderate rebels: are they moderate rebels or allied with the extremist Front? Are the moderate rebels allied with the Nusra Front?

How is the government portrayed as a political actor?

The government is portrayed as guilty of people’s suffering. The texts quote members of the opposition that have an attacking language towards the government side and the president. In
text 1, a senior member of the opposition Syrian National Council is quoted saying that it is a mockery that the Syrian people should have to negotiate with “their executioner, who has not stopped killing, torturing… and raping women for 16 months”; In text 2, the head of the opposition during that time was quoted saying “We are joining Geneva talks to rid Syria of this criminal”. Conboy says that using exaggerated language is a way of emphasising a particular perspective as well as adding an opinion into the news (Conboy 2007: 88). This might be a use of exaggeration in order to emphasise the opposition’s perspective that portrays the government as guilty of people’s suffering.

Signs of there being a latent political meaning in the coverage could also be to exclude certain characters when narrating the news (Conboy 2007: 175f). This could be seen in several of the examined articles by leaving out details concerning the other side which is not supported, or by not mentioning details that the side which is supported by the media source has done. It could be seen for instance in text 1, where one of the patterns in the text is that the article seems certain that the meaning behind ‘having blood on the hands’ is the government side, making it a way to portray the government as guilty of people’s suffering, despite that the rebels are also engaged in fighting and shelling places in Syria and despite that all sides involved in the battlefield will naturally have ‘blood on their hands’.

Generally, the texts give much more space to the opposition, including the opposition’s views, opinion, accomplishments, and situation, meanwhile very little is actually being given to the government side, making the portrait of the government limited and speaking of them solely as the attacking side in the war and the obstructive side in the peace negotiations. Nonetheless, being the obstructive side in the negotiations, as text 5 and 6 exemplify, clashes with a recurrent pattern in the portrait of the opposition, namely that the opposition groups are often described as having difficulties to unify themselves and struggling to come to a decision whether to even participate in the negotiations, and this could might as well be considered as obstructive to the peace negotiations that require both sides to be present in order to achieve anything.

How could these portraits be explained?

Linking back to the analysis, each text had potential latent meanings. Those meaning were attached to the patterns of manifested political meanings that were made out of data retrieved from the textual analysis, and this data was given a latent meaning attached to it in accordance
with interpreting the patterns which the data shaped. Catalysing messages is sometimes identified in the latent meaning, while other times it is clearly expressed in the words and not hidden. Exemplifying manifested meaning and latent meaning respectively, an example could be seen in text 5, where the article tells of the continuous fighting in Syria and the risk it poses on the peace negotiations falling apart. While this could be considered the manifested meaning, the latent meaning is what is written between the lines, namely that certain people are suffering in the fighting and the sieges, with inhabitants of regime-sieged Madaya starving, pointing out the regime only and leaving out areas that are simultaneously in siege by the opposition/armed groups, such as Kefraya or Fou’a (Aboufadel b, 2015), or by ISIS such as Deir Ezzor (JFL 2016: 7).

Generally in the texts, the view of not compromising with the other side is evident. This could be setting the agenda that the ‘good’ side (subjectively speaking) should not compromise with the other side, adding an opinion to the news (Conboy 2007: 88) that the other side is impossible to compromise with since it is held responsible of the hostilities in the war. Reading between the lines, using attacking (political) language could be in order to legitimate what one side is doing, or to delegitimise what the other side is doing. Linking to the principle of conflict reporting, where the journalist or reporter has an active role when telling or writing the news, this applies subjectivity to the news even though he or she does not refer to themselves as a source or a character in the story when telling what has happened – the selected parts of the story and the way that the events are told is in accordance with the viewpoint of the media source telling this (2007: 20). This could be considered a language of persuasion, meaning parts of the news which are supposed to be objective yet have a subjective language attached to them (2007: 73). Citing Conboy, who quotes Matthew Kieran, he writes “a journalist’s report should aim to persuade the audience that his or her description and interpretation is the rational and appropriate one” (2007: 75).

Alike what Bennett et al write in their study (mentioned in subchapter 2.1), saying that the concept of media being the public guardian of surveilling what is going on has “been pushed out of daily consideration by relentless pressure from the business side of the news media and the tendency of Washington insiders (including members of the elite press) to conflate power with political reality” (Bennett et al 2007: 1f), the contents of the texts could be linked to this in terms of al-Jazeera possibly being affected by its background (Qatar-founded media) – the business side of the news media conflating power with political reality, affecting the
coverage. Similar to the study made by Abdul-Nabi, the coverage is sometimes in favour of the allies of Qatar, those being the Syrian opposition in the Syrian war.

Considering the political meanings identified in the texts, the latent meaning could be to seek to divide the sides of the Syrian war into two sides that resemble a division between the people and the regime, thereby portraying that the regime is oppressing the people. Seeing the people to be oppressed and supporting the oppressed people without mentioning this word, fits in with the portrait in text 1 about the Syrian people who should not negotiate with “their executioner, who has not stopped killing, torturing… and raping women for 16 months” (SNC\textsuperscript{15} member quoted saying). This could clearly be seen when portraying the government side in al-Jazeera’s texts, for instance in text 4 where it brings up pro-government opinion yet points out that the interviewed news anchor saying this is “working for the state-sponsored Syrian TV” and that “her channel does not host members of the exiled opposition, whom the government dubs ‘tools of the West’ and supporters of ‘terrorists’”. Al-Jazeera’s texts portray the opposition to be representing and speaking for the people, which is identified in terms of the opposition being the one to have the Syrian people’s support, as seen in text 2 where the opposition is quoted saying “We are supported and relying on people who are facing many atrocities that are unprecedented in history”. In the same text, the US Secretary of State in 2014 was quoted saying “This is a courageous vote in the interests of all the Syrian people who have suffered so horribly under the brutality of the Assad regime and a civil war without end”.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary

A pattern could be seen between the first, second, and third round of the peace negotiations – a pattern which indicates that nothing has changed. Despite there being nearly four years from the first to the third round, and despite new actors entering the political (and military) arena, a difference between the rounds and the way that the two sides are portrayed is unseen. Instead, there are several similarities in how the two sides were portrayed, for instance, in the second round and the third round. In both of those rounds, the opposition remained the protagonists. The president’s role was central in the texts for the second round, and it reappeared in the texts for the third round, suggesting that the conflict is still locked concerning this matter.

\textsuperscript{15} SNC stands for the Syrian National Council, which should not be confused with the Syrian National Coalition.
Additionally, the texts tell about the difficulties of the opposition to unify themselves and to decide whether to participate in the peace negotiations. This was found in the second round as well as in the third round. Basically, the texts elaborate on the same themes in the second round as in the third round – participation, (pre)conditions, the president’s future, and the regime – indicating that not much has actually changed. Maybe that in itself is a latent meaning, the coverage catalysing the conflict by portraying that the peace negotiations are going nowhere. This could make the media source a part of the war since the texts portray a certain side as the protagonists regardless of the supposed objectiveness of media, based on which side it stands in the war; additionally, this suggests a hypothesis that latent meanings can be found in the texts and that these meanings are political: by setting the agenda on what is important to think about and how to think about it, and portraying the two sides of the Syrian war, the texts attempt to create a certain image of the event of the peace negotiations through their portraits.

Adding the fact that a considerable amount of space is given to the opposition, which portrays the Syrian people to be oppressed and supports the oppressed people against the government who is killing the people and who is not serious16 in the peace negotiations, the coverage could be considered as one that negatively catalyses a peaceful event in the Syrian war – the peace negotiations. The texts could be interpreted alike the view not to compromise with the other side, holding the ‘other’ side responsible for the hostilities in the Syrian war.

8.2 Discussion

Based on the analysis, it is plausible to conclude that al-Jazeera’s coverage is serving as a part in the Syrian war by being pro-opposition; also, it takes a catalysing role when holding the other side responsible for the peace negotiations failing to achieve peace, and disencourages dialogue with the other side, both of which could mean a peaceful end to the war would negotiations and a dialogue succeed. This allows the contents of their texts to convey their view and position expressed in words and values rather than objective facts. The subjectivity in some of the articles, and thereby the absence of objectivity, could be linked to the importance of transparency and objectivity as well as being independent from the author’s opinion, meaning a bias in the process of intersubjectivity.

16 In text 5, the HNC spokesman of that time is quoted saying “We want the peace talks to work, but there is no seriousness on the part of the regime.”
Texts that support one side of the war and portraying this side as the rightful one (and the other side as antagonists) are being used. Herein lies the relevance of being aware of the latent political meaning that might shape the Syrian war differently to what reality actually is. This links to “promoting civic awareness” and the importance of being aware of political meaning that promote or impede a certain side (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 225). As previously mentioned, the process of conflict reporting includes the journalist being active when telling the recipients what has happened, as the words that are written or said define the actual event as well as emphasise what or who could be at risk of e.g. suffering due to the conflict (Orgeret & Tayeebwa eds. 2016: 11). Knowing the ability which media has to set the agenda on what event is more important than other to observe and be concerned about, and how to think about it (McCombs & Shaw 1993: 60ff), the way that conflict reporting is done in terms of mediating in a conflict becomes crucial as well as the awareness to the potential bias that might occur, which this study identifies.

The analysis could be linked to the previous study made by Abdul-Nabi in which she says, “not presenting a scientific or military or non-propagandistic analysis about who was possibly responsible for the attack as well as giving more time and space to the opposition´s views facilitated the opposition propaganda, weakened the regime´st claims and obscured the other side of the story.” (Abdul-Nabi 2015: 288f). In her study, Abdul-Nabi is talking about the chemical attacks in Ghouta; however, the similarities with this case is clear despite this study focusing on the peace negotiations rather than a military event. For instance, these similarities are seen in al-Jazeera´s texts that give more space to the opposition´s views and explanations, as in text 3, which might have facilitated opposition propaganda; also, by giving less space to the government side in the texts and by adding hints of criticism to the pro-government views, as seen in text 4, it weakens the government´s claims as well as obscures the other side of the story – the side of the story that is not merely told by the opposition.

Media sources are able to reach out to many people considering today´s technology, and can shape the public opinion by shaping the agenda with or without it being intentional. Such bias could be particularly important to be aware of, especially considering the vast number of readers and viewers that large media sources such as, for instance, al-Jazeera reaches on a daily basis and in several languages – namely millions of people around the world.

Considering this discussion, a suggestion to what could be further researched about would be how the framing theory could be linked to this case. It would be inspired by, and linked to, a previous study by Rune Ottosen and Sjur Ovrebo, whose study concerned the Norwegian
newspaper Aftenposten’s coverage of the chemical attack in Ghouta, using a framing analysis to examine who is to blame for the chemical attacks (Ottosen & Ovrebo 2016: 63f). In this case here, using the framing theory instead would examine e.g. whose fault it is that peace is yet to be achieved in Syria. Such a study suggests a framing analysis concerning the coverage of the peace negotiations and which side is blamed for the negotiations not putting an end to the Syrian war.
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17 Original article title in Arabic.
18 Information about the members of the People’s Assembly was updated by the page after the parliament election in Syria during 2016.
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APPENDIX 1 – text 1

Syria transition plan denounced by both sides

State media and opposition groups criticise UN-brokered plan for unity government, as violence continues across country.

1 Jul 2012

The opposition and state media both branded an international plan for a transition in strife-torn Syria a failure, as the death toll for a weekend of violence topped 140.

World powers meeting in Geneva on Saturday agreed that the transition plan could include current regime members, but the West did not see any role for President Bashar al-Assad in a new unity government.

Russia and China insisted that Syrians themselves must decide how the transition takes place, rather than allow others to dictate their fate.

Moscow and Beijing, which have twice blocked UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, signed up to the final agreement that did not make any explicit call for Assad to cede power.

Official Syrian media and the opposition Local Coordination Committees (LCC) group demonstrated rare agreement in slamming the outcome.

The meeting "failed," trumpeted Al-Baath, newspaper of the ruling party of the same name.

"The agreement of the task force on Syria in Geneva on Saturday resembles an enlarged meeting of the UN Security Council where the positions of participants remained the same," it said.

'Positive elements'

The LCC, which organises protests on the ground in Syria, said the outcome showed once again a failure to adopt a common position.

It called the transition accord "just one version, different in form only, of the demands of Russian leaders allied to the Assad regime and who cover it militarily and politically in the face of international pressure".

Burhan Ghalioun, a senior member and former head of the opposition Syrian National Council, told pan-Arab television Al-Arabiya that "this is the worst international statement yet to emerge from talks on Syria".

According to the SNC’s official Facebook page, he described the plan as a "farce".
Ghalioun called a "mockery" the notion that Syrians should negotiate with "their executioner, who has not stopped killing, torturing... and raping women for 16 months".

SNC spokeswoman Basma Qadmani, however, told the AFP agency in Ankara there were some "positive elements" in the deal, although "important elements remain too ambiguous... and the plan is too vague to foresee real and immediate action".

Qadmani said: "The first one is that the final declaration says that the participants agree to say that the Assad family cannot rule the country any more, and therefore the Assad family cannot lead the transition period.

"The second positive element is the agreement that the transition should comply with the legitimate aspirations of Syrian people.

"For us this means that Assad should go because Syrian people have already said that they want Assad to go."

**Violence continues**

Iran, a strong ally of Assad, said the Geneva meeting was "unsuccessful" because Damascus and Tehran were not invited.

"This meeting was unsuccessful... because Syria was not present and some influential nations were not present," Hossein Amir Abdolahian, an Iranian deputy foreign minister, told state television.

The United States and European nations reportedly opposed the presence of Iran, although UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan and UN chief Ban Ki-moon had wanted Tehran to attend.

Opposition groups are to hold a two-day meeting in Cairo from Monday and are also expected to meet on Tuesday with Arab ministers in a bid to agree on a shared platform, Egyptian media and the Arab League said.

The Geneva deal came despite initial pessimism over the talks amid deep divisions between the West and China and Russia on how to end the violence that the Observatory says has killed more than 15,800 since March 2011.

In weekend violence, more than 140 people were killed across Syria, including 120 on Saturday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. On Sunday, at least 21 people were killed, including five in the central province of Hama.

Annan said on Saturday it was up to the Syrians to decide who they wanted in a unity government. But he added: "I would doubt that Syrians... would select people with blood on their hands to lead them."

The United States and France both said it was clear there was no future role for Assad.

SOURCE: Al Jazeera and agencies
APPENDIX 2 – text 2

Syria main opposition to attend Geneva talks

Syrian National Coalition votes in favour of participating in January 22 peace talks in Switzerland.

19 Jan 2014

The Syrian National Coalition, the main umbrella opposition body in exile, has agreed to participate in long-awaited peace talks planned for January 22 in Geneva.

The Syrian National Coalition's media office said on Saturday that of 75 voters, 58 voted in favour of attending the conference against 14 'No' votes, two abstentions and one blank vote.

"We are joining Geneva talks to rid Syria of this criminal [President Bashar al-Assad]." Ahmad Jarba, president of Syrian National Coalition said at a press conference after the ballot held on the outskirts of Turkish city of Istanbul.

Al Jazeera's Anita McNaught, reporting from Istanbul, said the Syrian opposition has struggled to reach a decision to join the talks.

"None of us were sure that they would get there," she said. "There were so many obstacles to overcome."

Our correspondent also said that the opposition wanted to make sure they have the support of the fighters inside Syria, before heading to Geneva.

As of Saturday evening, the Syrian opposition has not named the delegates to the negotiations, she said. "The names of the delegates will likely be released on Sunday."

Jarba said the opposition was going to the talks with the head held high. "We are supported and relying on people who are facing many atrocities that are unprecedented in history," he added.

US Secretary of State John Kerry on Saturday praised the decision by Syria's opposition leaders to attend the peace talks.

"This is a courageous vote in the interests of all the Syrian people who have suffered so horribly under the brutality of the [Bashar] Assad regime and a civil war without end," Kerry said in a statement, calling the opposition decision to attend the Geneva II meeting "a path that will ultimately lead to a better future for all Syrians".
The secret ballot was a result of pressure from Western and Arab sponsors of the opposition.

Many members boycotted the Istanbul meetings that began on Friday, forcing the Coalition's legal committee to approve the decision in a simple majority vote.

The vote came two days after the Syrian government agreed to attend the talks aimed at ending the nearly three years civil war.

Al Jazeera obtained a letter written by the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem to the UN chief that appeared to set conditions for the peace talks.

"It should be noted that we do not agree with certain points mentioned in the letter of invitation, simply for the reason that they are in conflict with the legal and political position of the State of Syria," Muallem wrote in reply to an invitation from Ban Ki-Moon.

**Long-awaited talks**

Geneva II talks will be the first face-to-face meeting between the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition since the country's crisis began in March 2011, killing more than 100,000 people and displacing millions.

The US and Russia have been trying to hold the peace conference since last year and it has been repeatedly delayed.

The aim of the conference, dubbed Geneva II, is to agree on a roadmap for Syria based on one adopted by the US, Russia and other major powers in June 2012. That plan includes the creation of a transitional government and eventual elections.

One of the main demands of the opposition was that President Bashar al-Assad agrees to step down before going to the conference. With his government troops keeping their momentum on the ground, Assad's government has said he will not surrender power and may run again in elections due in mid-2014.

Many Coalition members were hesitant to attend a conference that has little chance of success and will burn the last shred of credibility the group has with powerful rebels on the ground, who reject the talks.

SOURCE: Al Jazeera and agencies
APPENDIX 3 – text 3

Explaining the Geneva II peace talks on Syria

Talks bringing together delegates from Syria's government and opposition will attempt to find solution to ongoing war.

By Basma Atassi
19 Jan 2014

Much is resting on the so-called Geneva II peace conference on Syria to end the conflict in the country.

The UN-backed talks, scheduled to begin on January 22 in Switzerland, are set to bring together representatives from both the government of President Bashar al-Assad and the Western-backed political opposition for the first time since the conflict began almost three years ago.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said the landmark conference would be "a mission of hope", adding that it was "unforgivable not to seize this opportunity" to end a war that has left more than 130,000 people dead and millions more displaced.

Origins

Following a year of deadly battles between forces loyal to Assad and opposition fighters, Moscow, which backs the regime, and Washington, which supports the opposition, agreed that there can only be a political solution.

In June 2012, officials from the US and Russia, along with other major powers, met in Geneva and agreed on a road map, known as the Geneva Communique, for Syria's political transition.

The document envisioned the establishment of a transitional governing body - agreed upon by both sides - in Syria with full executive powers that would oversee elections and put the country on the path to democracy.

Since then, several attempts to bring together the two sides have failed, mainly because of disputes over who should represent the Syrian opposition and government in the talks and over Assad's future role in the country.

In November 2013, Ban announced a new date for talks: January 22. He called the Geneva II conference "a vehicle for a peaceful transition" that would fulfil Syrians' aspirations for freedom and dignity.
The goal of Geneva II would be to achieve an agreement between the government and the opposition for the full implementation of the Geneva Communique.

Where the Syrian government stands

The Syrian government confirmed that it would attend peace talks - but made it clear that it did not accept the opposition's demand that Assad steps down. In a statement, the Foreign Ministry said that those who supported Assad's removal from power should "wake up from their dreams".

The government also wants "the fight against terrorism" to be set as a priority in the upcoming talks.

Ending support for the "armed terrorist groups" in Syria is "crucial for any political solution to the crisis in Syria to succeed", the Foreign Ministry said in a letter sent to Ban. Officials often label all armed opposition groups as terrorists.

The opposition

Syria's main opposition bloc, the Syrian National Coalition, voted on January 18 to attend the conference, following days of procedural disputes among its members.

Initially, the internationally recognised Coalition said it would only attend the talks if a number of conditions were met, including the release of political prisoners - particularly women - and allowing relief access to besieged areas. The bloc also said that it would not take part in the talks unless Assad vowed to stay out of the envisioned transitional government.

A week before the talks were set to begin, the Syrian government appeared to have made an effort to show goodwill by announcing that it was willing to swap prisoners with the rebels and was ready to take "a series of humanitarian steps" to improve the delivery of aid.

However, several politicians in the Coalition who reject the Geneva talks say they are doing so to reflect the wishes of fighters on the ground.

The commander of the powerful Ahrar al-Sham rebels, Hassan Abboud, has told Al Jazeera his group would not be bound by the outcome of the Geneva talks. "We see Geneva as a tool of manipulation," he said.

The leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, the "official" al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, also told Al Jazeera his group would reject the outcomes of the conference. "Those taking part in the conference do not represent the people who sacrificed and shed blood... We cannot allow the Geneva II game to fool the nation," Abu Mohammad al-Joulani said.

Zahran Alloush, the head of the Military Committee of the the powerful coalition known as the Islamic Front, tweeted that he would ask the group's leadership "to endorse putting the participants of both parties in Geneva II on a wanted list".

Who's going?
The Syrian government's delegation will be headed by Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem. Media reports suggest that Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Moqdad, presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban and Syria's UN envoy Bashar al-Jaafari will also be part of the delegation.

The opposition's delegation would be headed by Ahmad Jarba, the president of the Syrian National Coalition. Coalition member Ahmad Ramadan said the 15-member delegation will include two representatives of the country's ethnic Kurdish minority, two for rebels and two for opposition groups based in Syria.

A senior Coalition member told Al Jazeera that the delegations would be made up of eight members in total, five of which would be Coalition members and three others coming from other opposition blocs.

Delegations from 30 countries are expected to participate in the conference. They were invited by UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi.

It remains undecided whether Iran, a staunch ally of Assad's regime, would be among the attendees. The US says Tehran should not be invited because of its failure to sign the Geneva Communique. Russia would like to see Iran in the conference. Tehran said it would only attend if given an unconditional invitation.

**Prospects of success**

Leaders of major world powers say that Geneva II remains the best opportunity to pull Syria out of the cycle of bloodshed.

But the possibility of achieving any agreement is questionable, amid the fundamental disagreement over Assad's future role. The opposition wants Assad to step down. Regime officials maintain that Assad should lead any political transition - and have also alluded to the possibility of him running for president in the country's April 2014 elections.

Moreover, given that the commanders of the major rebel groups made it clear that they were not bound by the outcomes of the conference, any ceasefire agreement is unlikely to be reflected in reality.

Diplomats from major powers, nonetheless, insist that there is no alternative.

"There is a binary choice here," Hugh Robertson, the British minister of state for foreign affairs, told Al Jazeera. "You either put pressure on them and try to have a peace agreement in Geneva. Or you do not bother and the fighting continues."

"If Geneva fails, we stop, we understand why, we regroup and we try again."

SOURCE: Al Jazeera
APPENDIX 4 – text 4

A state news anchor's take on the Syria war

Elissar Moualla tangles with Syrian opposition at Geneva talks and explains her support for the government.

by Basma Atassi
30 Jan 2014

Geneva, Switzerland - Among dozens of Syrian and foreign journalists covering the Syria peace talks in Geneva, Elissar Moualla stands out.

The popular Syrian news anchor, working for the state-sponsored Syrian TV, never misses an opportunity to confront the opposition delegation.

With a loud and agitated voice, she asks tough questions in press conferences and she challenges statements the opposition representatives make in the more informal media hub, the garden of the UN headquarters.

"Can you tell me why the armed groups [you support] are holding women and children hostage in Homs?" she yells to an opposition spokesman, referring to the city where rebel-held areas have been besieged by government troops for 18 months.

"You claim you want to stop the fighting, but do you have control over the armed groups?" she asks another.

The conference in Switzerland is the first time the Damascus-based anchor has interacted with the Western-backed political opposition trying to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Her channel does not host members of the exiled opposition, whom the government dubs "tools of the West" and supporters of "terrorists".

She says the opposition representatives were "shocked" when they faced reporters from Syrian state media. "Even though they are trained to answer journalists' questions, this is the first time they've been grilled by journalists coming from inside Syria. This is why they couldn't deliver their messages as effectively as they wanted," the 37-year-old tells Al Jazeera.

Rebels are 'manipulated'

For Moualla, the peace conference is a media parade - but also a battlefield of countries she believes are trying to meddle in the affairs of her country.

"This is the first time I see how big is this game of nations and how the fighters in Syria are manipulated," she says as she sips her coffee in the press bar at the UN building, where the US- and Russian-backed talks are taking place.

"For the first time I pity the [opposition] fighters because I realise just how misled they are. They think they are fighting for the cause of freedom or a religious cause or whatever cause it is. But in reality, they are fighting the battles of other countries," Moualla says.
Syrian TV regularly airs footage of fighters killed by Syrian army soldiers in different parts of the country. "Despite all the suffering they have caused, I still cringe every time I watch them dead on TV. I don't like them and I hate extremism, but I am human," Moualla says.

"I always tell my colleagues: 'When you film them, do not take these harsh images; they are humans. Cover them when you film them.'" She then quickly adds: "Those same people would kill me if they saw me."

Many rebel groups consider state media employees legitimate targets because they defend the Syrian government. Presenting the views of her channel has come at a great cost for Moualla, who says she has received a barrage of death threats and vicious bashing. "I receive countless phone calls and messages. They once threatened to kill my father. And the swearing is as ugly as it can get."

Going from her home in a flashpoint area on the outskirts of Damascus to her workplace in the centre of the capital is also a daily challenge. She recounts the day she thought her life was nearing its end: "One time, three armed men wearing black bands around their heads tried to attack me in my car after they recognised me. They ran away after the police arrived. I will never forget that day."

Her parents, who lived in the coastal province of Latakia, have left their hometown and moved to Damascus because they are worried about her safety. But the threats have not deterred her from carrying on with her job. She remembers her colleagues who lost their lives and says some other pro-government journalists suffer even more than she does.

At least five employees of Syrian TV have been killed in the conflict, and the fate of one of Moualla’s friends in the channel, Mohammad Saeed, remains unknown after he was kidnapped.

**Journalists in danger**

Over the past three years, scores of journalists reporting on the Syrian conflict have been killed, arbitrarily arrested, subjected to enforced disappearances or tortured. Both Syrian authorities and armed opposition groups have carried out these abuses, turning Syria into one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists to work in.

Independent journalists have also found it difficult to report from Syria due to restrictions imposed by the government. Numerous media workers have been barred from the country.

Lately, however, the Assad regime has become more willing to allow journalists into the country. The information minister, who is part of the Syrian government delegation in Geneva, has on several occasions in the past few days, invited the reporters gathered around him to come to Syria "to see the truth."

Moualla believes that the government's narrative of events in Syria has now become an undeniable truth. "Nobody can deny it," she says. "The government is defending its territory from terrorists."

“There is a truth that should be acknowledged: They are monsters. They are monsters that have been released on Syrian land. Not humans."

- Elissar Moualla, Syrian news anchor

The Assad regime labels all armed opposition as "terrorists", while the fighters say they took up arms to "defend themselves" following a brutal crackdown on mass anti-government protests that erupted across the country nearly three years ago.
Moualla believes that the coverage of the Syrian conflict by most media organisations has been biased, whether intentionally or unintentionally. She says atrocities committed by opposition forces have not been covered well by foreign media and the Syrian state media.

The government has at times covered up crimes committed by armed groups in divided cities like Homs, to prevent a rift among the people, she claims. “The government demanded from reporters [of state media] that they do not film these atrocities, so that the Christian wouldn't view the Muslim in a negative way, so that the Alawite wouldn't view the Sunni in a negative way.”

The UN and international human rights organisations have accused both the government and the rebels of committing atrocities. However, the rights groups have held forces loyal to the Syrian regime responsible for most of the abuses and blamed the authorities for targeting civilians.

**Deadlock in Geneva**

“The Syrian army is killing, but it's killing the terrorists,” Moualla insists. “There is a truth that should be acknowledged: They are monsters. They are monsters that have been released on Syrian land. Not humans. Some of them hold Syrian citizenship. But they have lost all ability to live in a normal society.”

Moualla wants those people to be brought to justice, just like the opposition wants Assad and his top generals to be tried for crimes against humanity.

Although the Geneva conference has brought supporters and opponents of Assad to the same press bar, they will leave as convinced as ever that the side they are backing is fighting for the right cause. What they share is one thought: that the negotiations they have watched unfold will not result in peace anytime soon.

Moualla will leave the peaceful city of Geneva for war-riddled Damascus, and return to the same death threats, the same sounds of shelling, and another news bulletin full of blood and death.

*A previous version of this article described Elissar Moualla as an anchor for al-Ikhbariya TV. She is an anchor for Syrian TV.*

SOURCE: Al Jazeera
Syria opposition threatens to walk out of Geneva talks

Opposition delegates say they will leave if government does not lift sieges on rebel-held areas and stop rocket attacks.

2 Feb 2016

Syria's main opposition bloc is holding its first meeting with UN envoy Staffan de Mistura in Geneva, before talks aimed at ending the war.

"We're optimistic and we are here to really find a solution for all Syrians no matter what side they are on," Salim al-Muslet, spokesman for the High National Committee (HNC), told reporters on Sunday.

"We wish to see food reaching the starving women and children. We want to see the women released from the regime's prisons."

Representatives of the Saudi Arabia-based group HNC landed in the Swiss city late on Saturday, a day after a delegation representing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad arrived and held preliminary talks with de Mistura.

HNC is threatening to pull out of the UN-sponsored peace talks if what it called the "crimes" of Assad's government persist.

Speaking to Al Jazeera in Geneva late on Saturday, Muslet said: "We want the peace talks to work, but there is no seriousness on the part of the regime."

Muslet said that the HNC would discuss with de Mistura on Sunday its conditions for joining the negotiations, which include the government agreeing to lift sieges on opposition-held areas and stop shelling them and agreeing to release prisoners.

"The priority is to lift the suffering of the Syrian people," he said. "If we see an implementation of these demands, including allowing trucks of aid into besieged areas, we will consider this as a sign of goodwill."

Riad Hijab, the HNC coordinator who did not travel to Geneva, said in an Arabic statement posted online that "if the regime insists on continuing to commit these crimes, then the HNC delegation's presence in Geneva will not be justified."

"The delegation will inform de Mistura of its intentions to withdraw its negotiating team if the UN and world powers are unable to stop these violations," Hijab wrote.

Monzer Makhous, a member of the Syrian opposition delegation, said: "We are here to test the intentions of the regime ... We do not have assurances, we have promises."
The proposed intra-Syrian talks are part of a peace plan set out in November by external powers embroiled in the five-year-old conflict, some on different sides.

The process envisions elections within 18 months but leaves unresolved the future of Assad, whose government has been making gains on the ground since Russia began supporting it with air strikes since last September.

Another thorny issue is which rebel groups will be involved in the talks, though all sides agree on the exclusion of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the al-Nusra Front, which is seen as allied with al-Qaeda.

Gennady Gatilov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, was quoted by the country's Interfax news agency as saying that there would be no face-to-face negotiations, only so-called "proximity talks" in which the sides gather in separate rooms at the same venue with mediators shuttling between them.

The talks are the first since two rounds of negotiations collapsed in 2014. Syria's conflict has killed more than 250,000 people, displaced millions and sent hundreds of thousands fleeing as refugees to Europe.

**Air strikes and starvation**

As the delicate process unfolded in Switzerland, there was no let-up in fighting in Syria. On Saturday, at least 15 people were killed and dozens wounded in suspected Russian air strikes targeting rebels near the northern city of Aleppo.

In the west of the country, opposition fighters said they had taken control of several checkpoints around the city of Hama, which is in a region where control is divided between government and opposition fighters.

Further south, residents of the besieged town of Madaya continued to die of starvation and a lack of medical supplies, despite the delivery of aid earlier this month, according to the Doctors without Borders (MSF) aid group.

MSF said on Saturday that at least 16 people - close to one person a day - had died since three aid convoys entered the town, near the Lebanese border 40km northwest of the capital Damascus, on January 11.

The group said that an estimated 320 people in Madaya were suffering from malnutrition, 33 of whom were "in danger of death if they do not receive prompt and effective treatment".

*Additional reporting by Al Jazeera's Basma Atassi in Geneva*

SOURCE: Al Jazeera And Agencies
APPENDIX 6 – text 6

Surge of clashes in Syria on eve of Geneva peace talks

Fresh offensive by Assad forces may threaten a truce that has largely held since February.

13 Apr 2016

Syria's landmark ceasefire was threatening to fall apart after a surge of fresh fighting, especially in northern Aleppo province, just as peace talks were set to resume in Geneva on Wednesday.

The UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, who has said the negotiations will be "crucially important," was in Iran for talks with a key backer of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.

This week's round of talks will be the second since the Assad government and rebel forces agreed to a partial truce brokered by Moscow and Washington, which has largely held since February 27.

It has raised hopes that steps may finally be taken towards ending a five-year-old conflict that has left more than 270,000 dead and forced nearly half of the country’s population from their homes.

De Mistura, who will host the talks, said the negotiations would focus on aspects of a peace roadmap that calls for a transitional government, a new constitution and, eventually, elections.

But the fate of Assad is still a major stumbling block.

"We will be focusing in particular on the political transition, on governance and constitutional principles," he told reporters in Damascus on Monday.

But concern has been mounting that a spike in violence focused mainly in Aleppo province, which borders Turkey, is putting intense strain on the ceasefire.

Pro-government forces were on Tuesday pressing an advance against the town of Al-Eis, held by fighters from al-Qaeda's local affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, and allied rebels, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said.

Al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group (ISIL, also known as ISIS) were excluded from the ceasefire but, complicating matters, in some areas the al-Qaeda fighters are allied with rebels covered by the truce.
Government planes carried out "unprecedented" air strikes in recent days on the rebel-held eastern parts of Aleppo city, according to the Observatory, which relies on a broad network of sources inside Syria.

Government forces, backed by Russian air power, pressed a similar offensive around Aleppo city during a previous failed round of talks at the end of January. Western powers blamed that escalation for the breakdown of those talks.

Al-Nusra and allied rebel groups were also pushing their own offensive on the town of Khan Touman near Aleppo city, the Observatory said.

Washington has expressed worries that an assault against Al-Nusra in Aleppo may spread to moderate rebel factions, which could cause the truce to collapse and derail peace efforts.

**Wave of strikes**

The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has also warned that continued indiscriminate attacks on civilians could cause the truce to break down.

It said recent attacks by rebel groups on Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods in Aleppo city and by government forces east of Damascus "threaten to derail the 'cessation of hostilities'”.

"A decrease in casualty numbers brought a much-needed respite for Syrians, but many civilians are still dying in unlawful attacks," Nadim Houry, HRW's deputy Middle East director, said in a statement.

The ceasefire brought relative calm to parts of northern and central Syria, allowing increased humanitarian aid deliveries and a significant drop in daily deaths.

Despite the talks, the government will go ahead on Wednesday with parliamentary elections in the areas it controls.

The UN does not recognise the vote and it has been dismissed by Assad's foreign and Syrian opponents as illegitimate.

De Mistura travelled from Syria to Iran on Tuesday to meet with senior officials in Tehran, which along with Moscow is one of Assad's key international backers.

As well as providing economic aid, Iran has sent military advisers from its elite Revolutionary Guards to Syria, dozens of whom have been killed.

Moscow launched a wave of air strikes in support of the government last September, though last month Moscow ordered the bulk of Russian forces to withdraw.

Russia’s defence ministry said two Russian military pilots were killed in a helicopter crash near the central Syrian city of Homs on Tuesday.