

How Syrian Women Landed at the UN Peace Talks and What It All Means

by Maria Luisa Gambale

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Some members of the UN-led Women's Advisory Board, including Asma Kutmaro, far left, an Islamist scholar, and Nawal Yazeji, in the pink shirt, a feminist. Geneva, April 2016.

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GENEVA — Like approaching a mirage, Syrian women have made significant steps in early 2016 to getting closer to the central negotiating tables of the extremely fragile intra-Syrian peace talks. It's a process that Syrian women and the United Nations have been building since mid-2013. And in the Geneva III peace negotiations — structured so far as proximity talks, with government and opposition delegations refusing to sit at the same table — there is officially room for women at the Palais des Nations here for an official Women's Advisory Board to the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura.

Formed in late 2015, the Women's Advisory Board consists of 12 Syrian women who meet with de Mistura separately from the official government and opposition delegations. The Advisory Board does not directly participate in the negotiations. Instead, it is an attempt to bring women from all sides of the conflict together in order to promote a

stronger gender perspective to the talks but in some ways to also prove that people from very different political backgrounds *can* sit at the same table together.

The Board represents a big step forward from off-site meetings held with Syrian women activists during the Geneva talks in early 2014, yet it's not the final goal, and many take issue with its existence. Indeed, when the Board gave its first official press briefing in March 2016, there were criticisms from men and women in the numerous opposition camps indicating that not everyone agreed that this new group was a step in the right direction.

The effort to include women in the negotiating process is part of an increasingly global movement, backed by UN Security Council Resolution [1325](#) (passed in 2000) and by [research](#) that strongly indicates that peace settlements are more likely to last if women are involved in the negotiations. In the current Colombian [peace process](#), for example, formation of a women's commission has been recommended to oversee implementation of any peace accords.

The Syrian Women's Advisory Board is a more ambitious venture, and as such it is worth examining what it has achieved so far and what criticisms of it mean for future efforts.

A Place at the Table

Since the beginning of the Syrian peace talks, women have been trying to obtain a more central role. On the ground in Syria, local peace efforts have often been led by women. In late 2013, various efforts, among Syrians and UN-led, were made to consolidate disparate women's groups. UN Women started work holding conferences to bring women together from across Syria and beyond and to provide workshops on how to enter negotiations effectively.

In January 2014, Syrian women made a case to Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN special envoy for Syria at the time, that women needed more of a role in the peace talks, but in the end they were still stuck on the sidelines. There were only two women on the government's official team and two on the opposition, all with limited roles. The talks collapsed after nine days, with nothing replacing them for the next two years.

In mid-2014, UN Women worked with several Syrian activists to form the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD). Another group, the Syrian Feminist Lobby, emerged as a homegrown alternative.

At the same time, de Mistura, a veteran Italian-Swedish UN mediator, was appointed the new UN special envoy for Syria (preceded first by Kofi Annan and then Brahimi) and stated from the outset that involving women in a material way was a priority for his tenure. The next opportunity to make an impact would be Geneva III, for which preparatory talks began in late 2015.

From a reporting viewpoint, the Syrian government's involvement in the talks is opaque, as it is very difficult to talk to their representatives; they are the only mediating group who refuse to take questions at press briefings during rounds of talks. And the Bashar al-Assad government's stance on women's rights is clear from its track record. Up until the revolution, which started in 2011, and throughout there were still personal status laws with extreme restrictions on women's rights and prohibition of women's rights groups that were not officially formed by the government.

The Opposition Delegation

The current blueprint for a peace process in Syria is based on several documents that everyone agrees on in theory: the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, the Vienna Communiqué of November 2015 and UN Security Council Resolution 2254, passed in December 2015. The latter expresses, among other things, the need for 30 percent representation by women in all future governing bodies in Syria, including transitional.

The High Negotiations Committee (HNC), which was created in December 2015 to represent the opposition, did not take advantage of the opportunity then to start enacting these proportions, neither in its larger body of membership nor in its delegation team. It added only one woman to the team for the beginning of Geneva III.

The problem isn't just the cold numbers. In an exclusive interview with de Mistura in Geneva in April, he noted that there were women on the team, "but the problem is that they don't talk. They're not allowed to talk, or they are not given an opportunity to intervene. Except when I insist in asking a specific question, which is forcing the process. They don't sit close to the center, they are on the margins. They're considered experts rather than actual delegates."

Mariam Jalabi is a member of the Women's Consultative Committee (WCC) to the HNC, which is working on articulating a gender perspective to the delegation team in the short term and getting more women on it in the long term.

In an interview in New York, where Jalabi is the director of the Syrian National Coalition to the UN, she said: “When the HNC was being formed, everyone out there for women’s participation tried to push the HNC to have more women there, at least 20 percent. At least 25 percent. It ended up being six percent. So, we decided to push for a women’s consultative group. If you have a women’s consultative group, then even if we’re not included in the actual negotiations, they cannot move ahead without coming back to us, looking at the papers from a gender lens.”

It bears noting that Bassma Kodmani, the executive director of the Arab Reform Initiative, a policy institute promoting democracy, has emerged as a strong diplomat on the opposition team, asserting herself in press briefings as the English-speaking delegate for her team and called out by de Mistura as a capable negotiator in the room. But she is only one person.

So, while the Consultative Committee continues to work on the delegate proportions from within the HNC structure, de Mistura decided to do something more dramatic.

The Women’s Advisory Board

De Mistura turned to UN Women and SWIPD for advice, and the result was the Women’s Advisory Board, which was organized in late 2015. It is by design inclusive, and its main goal is to find ways to reach consensus. Opposition, government sympathizers, Islamist-tending women are all sitting at the same table. But the inclusion of women sympathetic to the regime — about four of them among the 12 participants — puts the board at odds, to some extent, with opposition negotiators and the Women’s Consultative Committee.

In a peace process that is part theater, sleight of hand and gesture, de Mistura holds his own on the stage. He maintains his perspective steadfastly against all contrary evidence. One can read the most dismal news report on what is often a hopelessly stagnated peace process and despair; yet de Mistura’s next statement to the press — while not ignoring the hard realities of the situation on the ground in Syria or the state of the peace talks — will insist on finding progress where it doesn’t seem to exist at all.

“The Women’s Advisory Board is a different way [for women] to bring forward their own message,” de Mistura explained. “Why? Because in the board, they all talk and *all* the time, and they intervene on *all* subjects. They produce papers. They actually produce ideas, suggestions, questions.”

The Board is an experiment; however, not all Syrian women agree with the strategy behind it. There are concerns about tokenism and its representation.

Women Meet the Press

On Jan. 29, 2016, the Geneva III talks were set to start after a long delay, occasioned by the HNC's reluctance to come to the negotiation table until more concrete moves were made to stop attacks against civilians, to allow for the passage of humanitarian relief into besieged areas and to release political detainees. The talks started and faltered, then restarted in March after a remarkable cease-fire agreement was reached on Feb. 27, brokered and monitored by the United States and Russia.

On March 22, the Women's Advisory Board made its press-briefing debut (see above video). Four of the 12 members stood at the podium in the Palais des Nations in Geneva, with Majdolin Hassan, a lawyer and deputy coordinator for SWIPD, giving a statement in Arabic, and Rim Turkmani, an astrophysicist based in London, giving it in English. Rounding out the group were Diana Jabbour, who currently works for Syrian television, and Nawal Yazeji, a lifelong feminist activist.

"Each day we lose for making peace in Syria," Turkmani began, "is yet another day of loss and suffering in Syria. And as the second round of talks comes to an end, we urge all parties to make serious efforts to make the political process a success."

She added that the Women's Advisory Board had "proven that despite differences, it's possible to reach consensus around the political process to get Syria out of the current crisis and to build a safe, free and united Syria."

After outlining that the Board was committed to "a Syrian-led, just and sustainable peace for all Syrians, men and women," while "ensuring the role of women in the negotiating process to no less than thirty percent in the entire political process," Turkmani further explained: "We're working on presenting papers, ideas and thoughts on all the negotiation topics, including confidence building measures, governance, constitution making process, and . . . to ensure that the peace talks consider the priorities and concerns of all Syrian women."

Turkmani urged "as a first step, all parties . . . release the detainees, starting with peaceful activists. Release all kidnapped hostages and disclose the fate of missing people. Two, we urge the immediate lift of economic sanctions on the Syrian people which hinder the provision of food, medicine and medical supplies."

She closed by saying what no one had compelled them to say: the naming of all (but one) of the members of the Board. It was a brave act because doing so exposed them to a level of individual scrutiny that they had not experienced before.



Rim Turkmani, an astrophysicist and part of the Women's Advisory Board, speaking in English at the group's press briefing, March 22, 2016. ANNE-LAURE LECHAT/UN PHOTO

Strong Reactions to the Briefing

The next day, the women's Facebook accounts lit up, with a negative onslaught varying from outright misogynistic attacks to thoughtful and coherent critiques.

I spoke with two women on the Board in mid-April, a few weeks after the briefing, giving the women time to reflect. Asma Kutmaro was known before the conflict as an Islamist feminist scholar whose academic work aims to prove it is possible to have Sharia law completely in line with feminist principles. Nawal Yazeji is not only a feminist activist but also ex-president of the Syrian Women's League, a group in existence long before the war, mostly operating under difficult conditions.

Kutmaro claimed not to have been surprised by the backlash on Facebook, but Yazeji was taken aback.

“It is possible,” Yazeji said diplomatically, “that those reactions came because we are women . . . and there is skepticism about women in the peace process. A lot of men refer to women as their wives, their daughters, their mothers. So, they don’t see the women as strong, independent people who are capable of doing this work.”

Christina Shaheen, the UN Women adviser to the Board, was more revealing. She characterized some of the online comments as: “Who are you, why you? Why are women here?” and thought some of it was “misogynistic slander that happens to women wherever they dare to engage in the public life and especially in this highly polarizing, sensitive issue.”

But much of the response came from other women. On March 23, the Syrian Feminist Lobby — the grass-roots coalition of Syrian women’s groups — released a statement expressing concerns about the Board’s statement and the group itself.

Referring to concerns about tokenism, the Syrian Feminist Lobby stated that “the role of women must not be flattened into canned stereotype such as ‘the peacemakers’ without regard for their crucial roles as political and human rights activists in the struggle against all forms of tyranny,” and reaffirmed the importance of releasing detainees, lifting sieges across Syria and continuing cessation of hostilities against the Syrian people.

The group specified vehemently that lifting international sanctions was out of line with opposition priorities and took issue — in a stance shared by the Consultative Committee — with that part of the press statement in particular.

Yazeji, of the Board, attributes the criticism to a misunderstanding. “In the press statement, we asked [for] the lifting of sanctions that impede the humanitarian aid from reaching the people,” she said. “But the opposition side . . . understood it was about lifting the whole sanctions on Syria, and not just for humanitarian aid.”

The Consultative Committee contends that it is not possible to talk about lifting sanctions at all, as it is the only leverage the opposition currently has against the government.

The Syrian Feminist Lobby finished its statement by saying, “With all due respect to the political and feminist struggles of some members on the Advisory Board, we nonetheless

believe that the Advisory Board does not represent a large segment of Syrian women and therefore only expresses the personal views of its members.”

Finding Common Ground at the Geneva Talks

As Shaheen of UN Women pointed out: “I think a lot of people weren’t prepared to see a woman who’s affiliated with the government standing next to a woman who’s seen as more on the opposition. You just don’t see that, and they’re standing together unified for a statement. And I think people were shocked.”

Yazeji explained how the Board came together and on what terms they entered the meeting room. “We are not representative,” she said, distinguishing them from the role of the two negotiating teams. “We are representing civil society organization, women civil society organization. The members of the Women’s Advisory Board have their own opinions. And they might be in opposition, they might be in regime, but that does not mean they represent the opposition or they would follow any decision that is taken by either of the delegations. Because they’ve come together as an independent group. Regardless of what is their political affiliation or opinions.”

Shaheen clarified, saying: “They’re the only forum that exists with Syrians from all sides. What does it mean to come together and find accommodation where there are such divergent views? Where no one is the victor, where no one is the winner? And I think a lot of people are still stuck in the mentality that someone is going to win at the end of the day. This board is saying, ‘We’re not trying to win here — and it’s urgent that we find common ground.’ ”

That does not happen easily. Yazeji and Kutmaro couldn’t share a lot about what happens inside the room during the Board’s meetings, but the women are writing position papers to present to de Mistura. While not having a direct impact on the talks, as all ideas and input will ultimately come from the formal delegations, the Board informs the work of de Mistura’s team, who must listen to what each side of the talks is saying to try to find commonalities.

Such composition is not easy. Yazeji drily joked, but was probably serious, that it can sometimes take hours to craft one sentence.

For de Mistura, the Board’s inclusiveness is a clear message to the main delegation teams. “We are giving you, all of you, men and women, a signal that when there is a

common interest, differences can be put slightly aside. Religious, political, there are people, women who support the [Assad] government. Others who are part of the completely opposite side. They're all there, and are talking to each other. Whereas I'm not able to convince the delegations to sit and sit across from each other . . . and attack each other, but at least look at each other."

But Yazeji recognizes that the cooperation that exists in the Board is possible because the group is not beholden to specific constituencies.

"We are not representing this or that," Yazeji said. "For them [the delegations], they cannot do the same. They are not independent. This is very important. They have to respond to people they are representing. When you are independent, it is very different."



Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy for Syria, talking to the press in April 2016 in Geneva. JEAN-MARC FERRE/UN PHOTO

Men Get the Final Say?

Inclusivity and consensus lie at the heart of a negotiation strategy, and both aspects raise difficulties for everyone. The Women's Consultative Committee also acknowledged issues within the ranks of the High Negotiations Committee, of which they are part.

The HNC was formed in Saudi Arabia, a geographical affinity that is not without contention. Among the countries with influence in the Syrian war, Saudi Arabia is assumed to be backing extremists and foreign fighters. For this and other reasons, some opposition politicians and activists will not join the HNC but instead have joined the alternative Moscow-Cairo platform, which has no negotiating power but enjoys the backing of Russia and Egypt.

Many take particular issue with the HNC's inclusion of Mohammed Alloush, a representative from Jaysh al-Islam — which Russia considers a terrorist group and has accused of using chemical weapons — who has been appointed chief negotiator by Riad Hijab, the head of the HNC. Jaysh is considered one of the strongest militant groups on the ground.

“How do you create a negotiation? How do you create an effective transition in Syria?” asked Mariam Jalabi of the Women's Consultative Committee. “You need to include all of the powerful groups on the ground. If you don't include Jaysh — I don't believe in them being the head of the delegation — but if you don't include them, then you're not containing them.”

The Consultative Committee to the HNC has its own struggles with selection. Its expanding list of members, now at 50, is composed of suggestions from the women already in the group, which must be approved by the HNC. This means that men mostly have the final say.

According to one person who was interviewed for this article but did not want to be named for fear of reprisals, the HNC rejected all names that were first proposed because the men did not see enough names they trusted — family members, friends and such — on the list. So, Hind Kabawat, the head of the Consultative Committee, compromised by expanding the list to combine the men's requests with those the women had submitted. So, everything is about compromise.

Ensuring Full Representation of Women

Some parties assert that the Women's Advisory Board does not represent all Syrian women, partly because its selection process was too opaque. They find any public statement by the Board problematic because Syrian women's opinion cannot be summed up by 12 people. The hashtag #WABdoesNotRepresentMe represented these concerns in social media's response to the press briefing.

Women on the Board are naturally surprised over concerns about inclusivity, which could be applied to anyone. But any effort to represent half the population as one concern is naturally fraught, and in the case of the Board, it's mixed with concerns about tokenism, urgent concerns about which priorities to choose and a legitimate fear of making missteps in a fragile process.

When de Mistura started forming the board in late 2015, the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD), formed by UN Women, provided six names from its ranks. Recognizing that this would be limiting, they then made a concerted effort to find nonaffiliated women who represented different geographies, religious and ethnic backgrounds and political viewpoints.

Kutmaro, the Islamic feminist, was not part of SWIPD before the Board selection. During a late-evening talk in April, she explained her accession. "I received an invitation from Mr. de Mistura. I'm an independent, and I immediately accepted, as I saw it as an opportunity to bring in my ideas of peace and to promote the peace process in general. My name was selected because those women's organizations who were already working in this process, and particularly with UN Women, nominated names outside of SWIPD to the Board to ensure representativeness and inclusivity."

Hiba Qasas heads the Middle East and North Africa division of UN Women; she started the capacity- and network-building activities in late 2013 that led to SWIPD's creation. Qasas began her career working with the Palestinian civil society sector and then worked in the Palestinian territories with the UN Development Program before moving to UN Women.

"I think the Women's Advisory Board brings together a combo of very capable Syrian women," Qasas said, "who represent different things, who represent the mosaic of Syria — backgrounds, political affiliations, geography — but they have diverse perspectives on the crisis. But of course these are not the only Syrian women leaders. So, it's very important to help them reach the broadest possible constituency. And having engaged

them, I can assure you that they have that desire. They want to bring together the broadest base of voices.”

This is work that both the Women’s Advisory Board and the HNC’s Women’s Consultative Committee take to heart — reaching back to their bases and making sure that the voices of people not in Geneva are heard. With the Board, this means they work during the Geneva sessions on writing position papers, advising de Mistura on gender perspective and all other issues. In between sessions, they each work — and are receiving additional training from UN Women to deepen this capacity — to communicate with their individual communities and networks.

The same goes with the HNC’s Consultative Committee. Noura al-Jizawi, a young former detainee and part of the group, spends time in refugee camps to maintain connections with the diaspora. “I’m here not because I’m Noura,” she said, “but because I’ve heard the voice and dreams and aims of all those women whom I have met in refugee camps, and in Turkey, and inside Syria.”

‘We Really Want to Be at the Table’

All of the women with whom I spoke, whatever their affiliation, are focused on the (at least) 30 percent goal in delegations and all future governance, transition and constitution-writing. And everyone seems to agree, more or less explicitly, that neither official delegation team seems sincere in its commitment to making this happen.

When asked if she was happy with the Women’s Advisory Board as a final structure, Yazeji, the feminist activist, was clear.

“No,” she said. “We took this as advisory board as a first step to the table. We want to get there, but this is our main demand. We agreed to the Women’s Advisory Board. I don’t think it’s a little thing. It’s historical. Because it’s the first time in the history of civil war or internal war this happened. So, this is not a small thing. But still it’s not what we want. We really want to be at the table, women, third party, independent. At the table. That’s our demand.”

Nevertheless, the Board thinks it is making a difference by having direct contact with the lead negotiator, de Mistura, given the complete refusal of the delegations to achieve 30 percent representation by women on their teams.

Jalabi, however, believes that the Women's Consultative Committee "is more effective because it has not come out alone in the press or media — its main purpose is to support the HNC and to ensure that papers are coming out all from a gender perspective. And that has happened. There's no paper that they're producing that's not saying equality between men and women and 30 percent inclusion. De Mistura is a special envoy from the UN who's getting advice from all of these people. But in the end, if we don't agree to it, de Mistura can't do anything. So, the power really — there's so much more power in the hands of the Consultative Committee than the Advisory Board."

Despite differences in strategy, everyone seemed to accept the power of symbolism. As Jalabi said: "I think even just the mere physical presence of women in Geneva right now is making it more of a normal attitude to have women there all the time. We are going to be here, you're not going to get rid of us. We're not coming as a separate entity. We're a part of this."

De Mistura, while clearly proud of the work the Board is doing, is not considering it the final resting point, either. When asked when the High Negotiations Committee must show its hand as far as bringing more women into the delegation, he responded: "So far, their commitment has been symbolic. We'll have another round of negotiations soon. In every round, they have a chance to improve instead of the contrary."

But when asked if the HNC must make a commitment for the next convening of talks — expected to be this month, in May — he said: "I have been telling them this regularly. And when I see the outcome, I protest also."

Will there be different pressure in May? "Yes," he said, "incrementally, from our side."

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