



BRIEFING PAPER

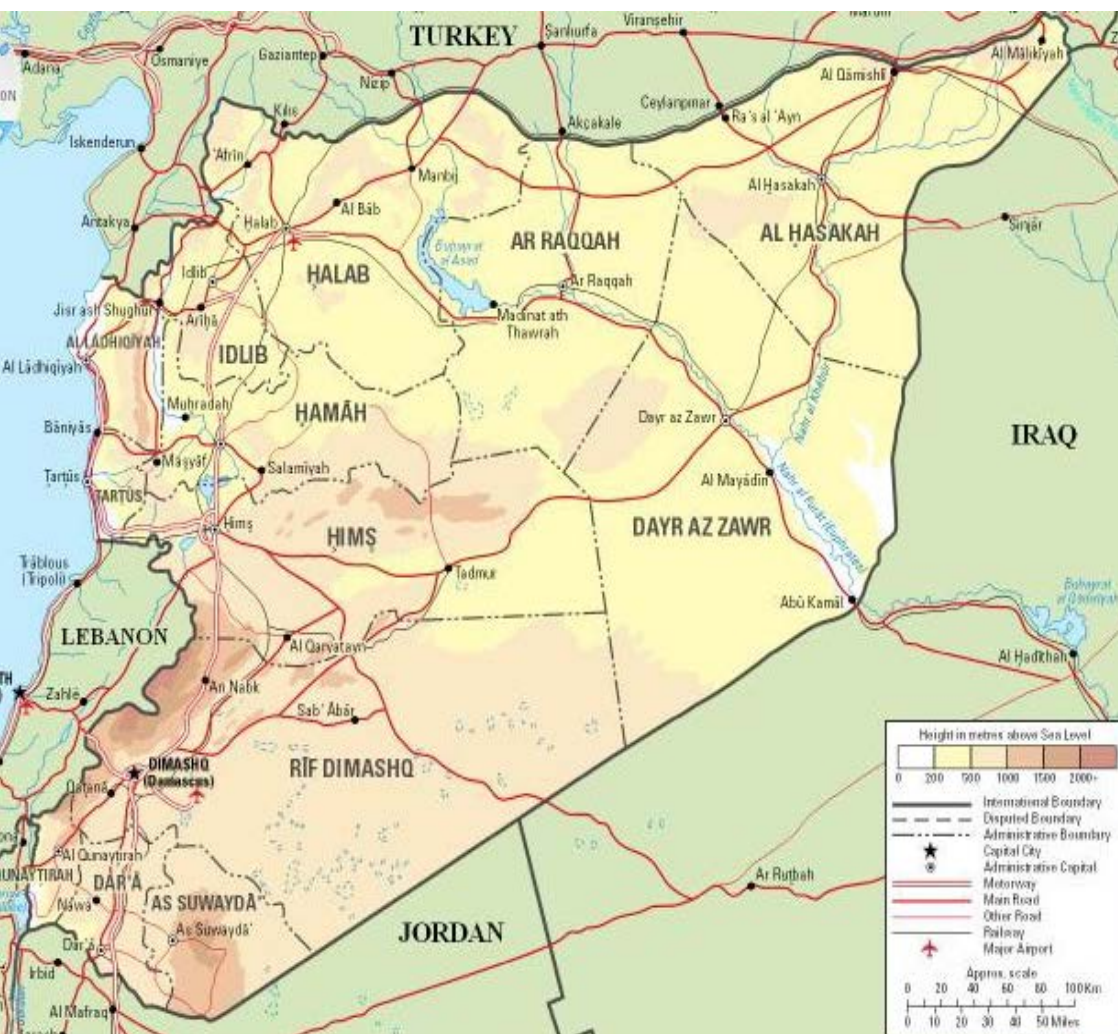
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Seeking a negotiated solution in Syria

By Ben Smith

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"How do they expect that after everything that has happened in Syria people will just kiss each other in the streets?"

(Member of the Syrian National Coalition)

Summary

Since 2012 there has been a political strand to efforts to end the violence in Syria, when there was a meeting at the United Nations in Geneva that produced a communiqué calling for a ceasefire, negotiations and a transitional government, and elections.

The Geneva Communiqué has formed the basis for negotiations since then but it has always been plagued by differences over who should form the transitional government and who should negotiate with whom.

The latest meetings took place in Vienna, with the inclusion of Iran for the first time. This development results largely from the success of Iran's negotiations with the world powers over its nuclear programme. On the ground, the dynamics have also changed, with Russia taking direct military action and Iran more deeply committed.

Together with a series of ISIS-linked terrorist attacks outside Syria, the latest being in Paris, these factors are giving the talks a new and different impulse, but the negotiations did not include any Syrians. The outside forces at the talks remain divided over the fate of Bashar al-Assad, which rebel groups constitute the legitimate opposition and which are terrorists. Even with those questions agreed, getting Syrians to support a political process would be difficult.

At the end of January 2016 the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura tried to convene talks between the Syrian government and representatives of the opposition. In the end, the process was suspended until 25 February, having failed to bring about any 'proximity' talks.

1. Why the push for negotiations?

1.1 Iranian and Russian support to Damascus

The successful conclusion of talks with Iran over its nuclear programme has led to hopes that Iran could become a more constructive partner in the Middle East, helping to resolve the intractable violence there. Iran had been excluded from previous rounds of the international negotiations to try to find a political solution to the Syrian violence. At the latest meetings, in Vienna in October and November 2015, the US dropped its resistance and Iran was invited.

Washington's decision to accept talks including the Iranians may be also a response to signs that both Iran and Russia are digging in to support the Syrian government.

In recent months Iran and Russia have sharply increased their military commitment, amid reports that the Syrian government was under increasing pressure and running short of manpower.¹ Russia started conducting air strikes from an air base in Syria on 30 September 2015, targeting rebel groups backed by the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia as well as ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.² In January 2016, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that Russian strikes had killed 893 Islamic State *jihadis* and 1,141 other opposition militants, including members of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.³ Since Nusra is one of the biggest groups operating in Syria, that would suggest a relatively even balance in Russian targeting between ISIS and Nusra on the one hand and the 'moderate' opposition on the other.

The Russian effort appeared to be coordinated with ground offensives conducted by the Syrian army as well as increased presence on the ground by Iranian forces, Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia supported by Iran and Iraqi Shiite militias.⁴

On 11 November with the help of Russian air cover, the Syrian army broke the ISIS siege of the important disused air base at Kuweiris, near Aleppo, where a small group of Syrian servicemen had been holding out against ISIS.

1.2 Terrorist attacks

There has been an outbreak of terrorist incidents recently that has pushed Syria up the international agenda even further. Turkey blamed ISIS (the so-called Islamic State, or Daesh) for the Ankara attack on 9 October and ISIS claimed responsibility for the downing of the Russian airliner over Sinai desert in Egypt on October 31 2015. The double

¹ For more on this see [ISIS/DAESH one year on](#)

² ['U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria'](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 5 October 2015

³ ['Russian airstrikes in Syria have 'killed more than 1,000 civilians''](#), *Agence France Presse*, 20 January 2016

⁴ ['Iran's Iraqi Shiite Proxies Increase Their Deployment to Syria'](#), Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 October 2015

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suicide bombing that killed 43 in Beirut, the multiple, coordinated attacks on 13 November in Paris were also claimed for the group.

With wide acceptance that the attacks in Paris were directed from the ISIS 'capital' in Syria, the French government described it as an "act or war" and later, in an address to both houses of the French parliament, he said: "terrorism will not destroy the Republic because it is the Republic that will destroy it."⁵ France has carried out intensified air strikes, in coordination with US forces, on what it said were ISIS targets in Raqqah.

The incidents have increased the pressure for more decisive action in Syria. But does that mean only military action? The changing situation on the ground might offer new opportunities for a political process.

The Lebanese foreign minister said that the timing of the Paris attacks was no coincidence – that it was meant to become the background to the Vienna negotiations.⁶

⁵ " «Le terrorisme ne détruira pas la République, car c'est la République qui le détruira», *Libération*, 16 November 2015

⁶ 'Timing of Beirut, Paris attacks 'no coincidence': Lebanon FM from Vienna', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 14 November 2015

2. Political negotiations

Talks in Vienna are reported to have been unusually cooperative. Nevertheless, familiar problems come up again with the new proposals. Can Bashar al-Assad be part of a transitional process? Western countries seem to be moving towards accepting that a transitional arrangement could have a space for Assad. And who will sit across the negotiating table from the government? Which groups are terrorists and which moderate?

The worry is that the situation on the ground is such that these questions cannot be agreed until yet more conflict has taken place. And others worry that it is the wrong time for negotiations because the Western-backed rebel groups are simply too weak.

2.1 The Geneva meetings

Negotiations to agree a framework for an eventual political solution to the violence have been going on for some time, with little to show for them on the ground. At the most basic level the shape of the framework has been agreed for some time: ceasefire, transitional government, negotiations and elections. But trying to fill in the detail has proved difficult.

The first internationally agreed plan was issued on 30 June 2012 after a meeting in the UN in Geneva of the Action Group for Syria, chaired by the first UN Special Envoy, Kofi Annan.⁷ The group, which included the permanent five members of the Security Council plus Turkey, with representatives of the Arab League, the EU and the UN, did not include either the Syrian government or the opposition.⁸

The communiqué called for a transitional governing body that “could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.” After the publication of the Geneva communiqué, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the transitional government could not include Bashar al-Assad, and was immediately contradicted by Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

The second Geneva round of meetings took place in January 2014, chaired by the new UN Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi. Present were representatives from across the world but, notably, not from Iran.

The meeting did include representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition, but under protest. Some groups resigned from the Syrian National Coalition, the secular opposition’s umbrella political body, because of its decision to attend. Many groups of fighters on the ground rejected the talks.

The meetings ended without a breakthrough. The Syrian government had refused to discuss the opposition’s demands, wanting the

⁷ [Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué](#), 30.06.2012

⁸ [‘UN-backed Action Group agrees on measures for peaceful transition in Syria’](#), UN Press release, 30 June 2015

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beginning of discussions to be dominated by the government's concerns.⁹

Although the whole group failed to reach agreement, a separate communiqué was issued by the 'London 11', who described themselves as the 'Core Group' and excluded Russia and China. The document called for the formation "by mutual consent" of a transitional government.¹⁰

2.2 UN peace initiative

Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, has been working on a peace plan since summer 2015. De Mistura formed four committees to work with both the Assad regime and the opposition to find a political solution to the conflict.¹¹

On 1 October 75 opposition armed groups operating under the Free Syrian Army umbrella released a statement rejecting the plan. The Syria National Coalition, the political arm of the non-Islamist opposition, endorsed the document. It was a rare sign of unity between these groups.¹²

2.3 Vienna

On 30 October, representatives of China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States met in Vienna to seek an end to the violence in Syria.

The talks included Iran – the first time that the Iranians had been invited to discuss Syria's future. Russia extended the invitation after US resistance was dropped and comes just a few months after the successful conclusion of negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. The move is widely seen as an attempt to extend the cooperation over the nuclear file to wider foreign policy matters.

Neither the Syrian government nor any of the myriad groups fighting against it were invited. They did participate in the last round of negotiations either.

2.4 Participants' viewpoints

Saudi Arabia was predictably cool about Tehran's participation in the talks. Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir said at a press conference with Philip Hammond, UK Foreign Secretary: "If they're serious, we will

⁹ ['After Second Round of Syria Talks, No Agreement Even on How to Negotiate'](#), *New York Times*, 15 February 2014

¹⁰ [London 11 communiqué on the Geneva II Conference](#), 31 January 2014

¹¹ ['Alarmed by Continuing Syria Crisis, Security Council Affirms Its Support for Special Envoy's Approach in Moving Political Solution Forward'](#), UN Security Council press release, 17 August 2015

¹² ['Why Syrian opposition rejected the UN's plan for Syria'](#), *al-Monitor*, 12 October 2015

know, and if they're not serious, we will also know and stop wasting time with them."¹³

The Saudis, along with Qatar and Turkey, insist that Assad must go as a precondition for establishing peace.

Iran has publicly said that no deal could be made that included the removal of Bashar al-Assad, Syrian President. Privately they are reported to accept that a transition period followed by his departure could work. Although it accepted the invitation to participate, Iran rejected Saudi Arabia's presence: "The Saudi regime has committed war crimes and its presence in the multilateral Vienna talks on Syria is dubious and illegitimate."¹⁴ However, sources close to the Rouhani government have sounded an optimistic note about the broad coalition including Russia and Iran being able to bring the situation under control.

Conservatives in Iran maintain a hostile line towards the West, as this editorial from a conservative newspaper illustrates:

The invitation offered to Iran to attend the Vienna talks points to the West's desperation and their defeat in the bloody game in Syria. ... The retreat of the Western and Arab players from their goals against the Syrian system and the nation clearly shows that the rules of the game have changed in Syria.¹⁵

The **Turkish** foreign minister re-iterated the Turkish demand that Assad should go:

The issue is when al-Assad is leaving. This will be determined within this transitional period. The new government will be established within six months, [at the] latest on June 30, [2016]. Then an 18-month-long period will begin. Al-Assad's future will be decided in this period. There are those who voice al-Assad's bid to run for elections. There is no such option.¹⁶

French foreign minister Laurent Fabius is quoted as saying that Western allies had agreed a precise timetable for the departure of Bashar al-Assad.

The **Syrian non-Islamist opposition** demands the departure of Bashar al-Assad as a precondition. A Syrian National Coalition statement ran:

The SNC consider the departure of Assad a crucial condition for the success of any political settlement and that he (Assad) or those whose hands were stained in blood would have no role in any phase transitional or permanent.¹⁷

¹³ ['After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria'](#), *New York Times*, 28 October 2015

¹⁴ ['Syrian opposition, rebels not invited to Vienna talks'](#), *Reuters*, 29 October 2015

¹⁵ 'Iranian press focus on Vienna talks on Syria, ties with USA', *BBC Monitoring*, 14 November 2015

¹⁶ 'Turkey rules out Assad's bid to run in elections as part of Vienna deal', *Hurriyet*, 16 November 2015

¹⁷ ['Syrian opposition, rebels not invited to Vienna talks'](#), *Reuters*, 29 October 2015

A member of the coalition said that it was a weakness that the SNC were not invited to the talks: "It is a big weak point in the meeting, because it will discuss the issues of the Syrians in their absence."¹⁸

The **Syrian government** has rejected the suggestion that Syria should have early elections, saying that Bashar al-Assad will serve out his term, which does not end until 2021.

2.5 Talks outcome

The final declaration of the talks agreed that the territorial integrity of Syria was fundamental and that all ethnic and religious groups should be protected, while the government would not be dismantled. The political process would be Syrian-led. But the document was silent on the fate of President Assad and other high-ranking individuals. The main points of the final declaration were:

1. Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character are fundamental.
2. State institutions will remain intact.
3. The rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, must be protected.
4. It is imperative to accelerate all diplomatic efforts to end the war.
5. Humanitarian access will be ensured throughout the territory of Syria, and the participants will increase support for internally displaced persons, refugees, and their host countries.
6. Da'esh, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the U.N. Security Council, and further, as agreed by the participants, must be defeated.
7. Pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, the participants invited the U.N. to convene representatives of the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition for a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections. These elections must be administered under U.N. supervision to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, free and fair, with all Syrians, including the diaspora, eligible to participate.
8. This political process will be Syrian led and Syrian owned, and the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria.
9. The participants together with the United Nations will explore modalities for, and implementation of, a nationwide ceasefire to be initiated on a date certain and in parallel with this renewed political process.¹⁹

2.6 Russian leak and new UN plan

On 11 November it was reported that a Russian peace proposal being circulated around the United Nations had been leaked. The main

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ [Final declaration on the results of the Syria Talks in Vienna as agreed by participants](#), 30 October 2015

difference appeared to be that it contained a timeframe for the proposed steps.

The plan proposed constitutional reform in Syria, lasting for 18 months. Once that was completed there would be elections to the presidency.

There was no mention of Bashar al-Assad leaving his post during the reform period. The plan called for Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy, to establish negotiations between the Syrian government and “a united delegation of the opposition groups”

The Syrian opposition rejected the proposal: “We will not accept that the regime stays even for 24 hours. Bashar should be detained and put on trial.”²⁰

The Syrian government is also against it: a spokesman for the ruling Baath party said there would be no presidential vote before Mr Assad’s latest term ends in 2021.²¹

On 14 November Staffan de Mistura launched a new proposal, based partly on the Russian document. The plan calls for

- Talks between the opposition and the government to start by 1 January.
- A transitional government to be established within six months
- New elections to be held within 18 months.

There was still nothing specific about the fate of Bashar al-Assad and, on the other big question – the representatives of the opposition – the document calls for the Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to decide who would negotiate with the government, while it appoints the Jordanian government to assess which rebels groups to designate as terrorist and therefore to exclude from that possibility.

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra would find their way onto the list of terrorist designations without any disagreement. But there are other groups that have been supported by Western allies but which have fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, particularly those in Jaish al-Fatah, an umbrella group responsible for much of the progress against the government earlier in 2015.²²

On 16 November, there were further discussions on the margins of the G20 meeting in Antalya, Turkey. Following on from the unexpectedly productive talks in Vienna, diplomats again reported a surprisingly constructive atmosphere. It was reported that Vladimir Putin had agreed to concentrate air strikes on ISIS rather than against opposition groups supported by the West. However, David Cameron described the

²⁰ [‘Syria conflict: Leaked Russian peace plan makes no mention of President Assad stepping down’](#), *Independent*, 11 November 2015

²¹ [‘Syria conflict: Leaked Russian peace plan makes no mention of President Assad stepping down’](#), *Independent*, 11 November 2015

²² For more on the recent situation on the ground, see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/DAESH one year on](#), July 2015

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distance between Russia and Western countries on Assad as "enormous."²³

Further talks may take place on the fringes of the Paris climate change conference, 30 November to 11 December.

²³ ['Putin transformed from outcast to problem solver at G20'](#), *Financial Times*, 16 November 2015

3. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia talks with the opposition

Saudi Arabia hosted a conference of Syrian Arab opposition groups in the capital Riyadh on 8-10 December 2015. Kurdish groups were not invited. The aim of the talks was to agree a common position for the proposed negotiations with the Syrian government and to form the many groups into a coherent negotiating team, possibly electing negotiating representatives.²⁴

The main groups

Radical Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham (Movement of the Free Men of Syria) briefly pulled out of the talks on 10 December in protest at the inclusion of the National Coordination Committee. Ahrar al-Sham said that the NCC, a coalition of left-wing Syrian parties, is a front for the government. They also said that the talks were not emphasising the Muslim nature of the Syrian people.²⁵

With Ahrar al-Sham signing up, the opposition groups succeeded in forming a 25-member supreme negotiating committee. A separate 15-member negotiating delegation would be selected by the committee.

A declaration of principles was agreed. Bashar al-Assad and his lieutenants would play no part in a transition to democracy. The declaration also called on all foreign militias and armed groups to withdraw from Syria; in other ways the declaration was based on the principles in the Geneva communiqué.²⁶

The Saudi academic who chaired the meetings, Abdulaziz al-Sager, said that there would be a meeting with the Syrian government in the first 10 days of January, convened by Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy.

²⁴ [‘Riyadh, Rumeilan, and Damascus: All You Need to Know About Syria’s Opposition Conferences’](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 December 2015

²⁵ [‘Key Syrian opposition group pulls out of Riyadh talks’](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 10 December 2015

²⁶ [Geneva Communiqué](#), 30 June 2012; For more on earlier stages of the political process, see Commons Briefing Paper [Seeking a negotiated solution in Syria](#), 18 November 2015

4. New UN resolution

On 18 December 2015 the UN Security Council passed unanimously a new resolution.²⁷ It endorsed the Geneva Communiqué and the statements issued after the Vienna talks and proposed talks between the Syrian government and opposition in January. A non-sectarian government was to be set up within six months and elections were to be held in 18 months, according to the resolution; the political process should proceed in parallel with a ceasefire. The UN undertook to start work on determining 'the requirements and modalities of a nationwide ceasefire'.

Comments from the Russian and US and other foreign ministers underlined that sharp differences remained over the future of President Assad, with the US and other Western representatives saying that he could not form part of the solution, while the Russians said that the Syrian people must decide, without a solution being imposed from outside.

UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said that a national ceasefire must be aligned with the political transition, a process that must involve the departure of President Assad.

However, the resolution itself made no mention of President Assad.

The resolution was greeted as offering a glimmer of hope by French foreign minister Laurent Fabius.

²⁷ ['Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 \(2015\), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks'](#), UN Security Council meeting coverage, 18 December 2016

5. The opposition

Meetings in Riyadh, as discussed above, in Syrian Kurdistan and in Damascus were held in December 2015 to prepare the opposition to the Syrian government for negotiations. The fact that there were three such meetings said something about how difficult negotiations would be.

The Damascus meeting was to bring together the government-approved 'patriotic opposition'. Many groups had earlier in the year been invited to talks in Moscow. Observers considered the meeting a ploy to discredit the Riyadh meetings.

After Turkish pressure, the main Kurdish force in Syria, the PYD, was not invited to the Riyadh conference. The PYD is affiliated to the Turkish PKK Kurdish party, which Turkey and others (including the EU) classify as terrorist. That left Kurdish forces to organise their own conference, inviting some Arab groups to diversify their appeal and try to circumvent Turkish opposition.²⁸ In general, Kurdish Syrian groups are hostile to mainstream Arab opposition groups.

The Riyadh conference issued a final statement in which the participants pledged to preserve Syrian state institutions but rejected a role for President Assad in the future of the country:

The participants agreed the goal of the political settlement is the establishment of a state based on the principle of citizenship with no place for Bashar al-Asad or the symbols and pillars of his regime in it or in any coming political arrangements.²⁹

They went on to demand confidence-building measures from the government:

The participants demanded the UN and the international community compel the regime to implement measures to confirm its good intentions before the beginning of the negotiating process.³⁰

These measures would include lifting death sentences from opponents of the government and releasing prisoners, ending sieges and the targeting of civilian areas with barrel bombs.

The conference agreed to set up a High Negotiations Committee, which would elect and oversee a team of 15 negotiators.

²⁸ Aron Lund, 'Syria's Opposition Conferences: Results and Expectations', 11 December 2016

²⁹ [Final Statement of the Conference of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces Riyadh \(December 10, 2015\)](#).

³⁰ *Ibid*,

6. Geneva meetings January 2016

The talks were originally set to open on 25 January in UN buildings in Geneva. The High Negotiations Committee, however, refused to attend. They said that their requests for confidence building measures had not been met, although Staffan de Mistura, the UN Envoy, had already stipulated that there could be no pre-conditions to the talks.

As opposition leaders were considering whether to attend the conference, intense government assaults on rebel-held areas, supported by Russian air power, continued. The plight of the residents of Madaya, a town near the Lebanese border, made headlines. Doctors Without Borders said that 23 had died from starvation during December and hundreds more were malnourished, after a government-imposed siege had prevented humanitarian access.³¹

Representatives of the Kurdish PYD left Geneva on the Friday, having failed to be invited to the UN meetings. They pledged not to be bound by any ceasefire decisions taken in their absence.³²

After considerable pressure from Western governments including the UK, and their Arab allies, the HNC agreed to meet the UN envoy, de Mistura, in Geneva on 31 January. The HNC agreed to enter talks if the government released 3,000 prisoners.³³ De Mistura had already met Syrian government representatives on 29 January. But Salim al-Muslat referred again to the confidence-building measures mentioned in the December UN resolution:

At least we should see something on the ground there in Syria. We should really stop these massacres against our people. So please help us, save our children, save the many children of Syria.³⁴

A major government attack around Aleppo continued, supported by hundreds of Russian air strikes. Laurent Fabius said:

We condemn the brutal offensive waged by the Syrian regime, with Russia's support, to encircle and asphyxiate Aleppo and its hundreds of thousands of inhabitants.³⁵

On Tuesday 2 February, the HNC said that its team would leave Geneva "the regime insists on continuing to commit these crimes."³⁶ Hopes persisted, however, of proximity talks, whereby the two sides would not meet but would be in the same building, communicating via mediators.

³¹ ['Syria: Siege and starvation in Madaya: immediate medical evacuations and medical resupply essential to save lives'](#), Medecins Sans Frontières press release, 7 January 2016

³² ['Syria talks: Anti-Assad opposition makes demands on prisoners and bombing but Kurds go home'](#), *Independent*, 30 January 2016

³³ ['Syria talks: Anti-Assad opposition makes demands on prisoners and bombing but Kurds go home'](#), *Independent*, 30 January 2016

³⁴ ['Syrian opposition group to meet U.N. envoy at peace talks'](#), *CNN*, 30 January 2016

³⁵ ['Syrian peace talks fall apart as Assad forces advance on Aleppo'](#), *Financial Times*, 3 February 2016

³⁶ ['Syria opposition threatens to walk out of Geneva talks'](#), *AL-Jazeera*, 2 February 2016

On 3 February, talks were suspended. De Mistura announced a pause until 25 February. He made an appeal for the powerful governments involved to do more to improve the situation on the ground and make the talks work.

7. Outlook

No major Syrian participant was involved in drawing up the latest version of the plan for a political resolution in ; the Syrian National Coalition had already refused to negotiate with Assad and one member was scathing about the proposals: "How do they expect that after everything that has happened in Syria, people will just kiss each other in the streets?"³⁷

Saudi Arabia has stated that it could continue to fund rebel groups if Assad remains:

We will support the political process that will result in (Assad) leaving, or we will continue to support the Syrian opposition in order to remove him by force.³⁸

Russia often appears sceptical that a non-jihadi opposition exists at all, although some change may have taken place recently, perhaps as a result of ISIS's recent attacks.

The problem of who to include in the opposition negotiations with the government has been partially resolved – the composition of the Syrian High Negotiating Committee was not the reason for the suspension of the talks, even if the important Kurdish opposition was side-lined.

Some argue that Russian strikes have improved the prospects for international agreement.³⁹ But the Syrian government's intensified its attacks, backed by Russian air power, on groups represented by the HNC just as the HNC was deciding whether to attend the conference. This suggests that the Syrian government and its backers are confident of the upper hand on the ground in Syria. They do not appear to be in a hurry to reach a negotiated settlement.

Even if there is international agreement, would it work on the ground? Michael O'Hanlon of Brookings asks who would police the settlement. One of the reasons for leaving the Syrian state institutions intact would be to fulfil that role, but the Syrian government is not accepted by the competing Syrian groups. He argues that the conditions on the ground are not right for the plan to work:

Tragically, Syria is not ripe for peace. More specifically, it is not ripe for the kind of deal Kerry appears to envision—a ceasefire on the battlefield and replacement of the Bashar Assad regime with a government of national unity. By trying to negotiate when conditions are not conducive, we fail to diagnosis the real problem and address it directly. We distract ourselves and squander precious time.

He points out that the West's allies on the ground only constitute about 10% of the total fighting forces.

³⁷ ['Syrian opposition: Vienna plan 'kicks differences down the road'](#), EL-Araby el-Jadeed, 16 November 2015

³⁸ ['Saudi Arabia to continue support Syrian rebels if Assad does not leave'](#), *Reuters*, 14 November 2015

³⁹ ['Russian air strikes in Syria may improve push for negotiated settlement, David Kilcullen says'](#), *ABC News Online*, 1 October 2015

... “Any ceasefire that Kerry could negotiate, to go along with a new government of national unity hypothetically replacing Assad in Damascus, would therefore be built not on the foundation of favorable military balances—it would be built on a foundation of sand. There would be no mechanism to enforce it; no neutral and respected army or police force that could give authority and legitimacy to the notional government of national unity and carry out its edicts.”⁴⁰

O’Hanlon goes on to argue that the plan needs in any case to be more radical; Syria cannot now be put back together, so a confederation should be created.

The *Washington Post* argued that the most significant achievement may have been to get Saudi Arabia and Iran to sit around the negotiating table in Vienna, since Saudi-Iranian rivalry goes to the heart of the Syrian conflict.⁴¹

The outcome of the Geneva talks, if they merit that name, shows that any reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while important, would not be enough. Although chosen to represent the opposition in negotiations with the government, the High Negotiations Committee is militarily weak. The Syrian government, the Russians and the Iranians seem to be in confident mood and are making progress on the ground – for the time being this does not seem to be favouring a negotiated settlement. If the two sides did face each other across the negotiating table, the government side would be backed up by military forces in Syria several times as strong as those of the HNC.

Added to the weakness of the ‘moderate’ opposition is the strength of feeling against the government on the ground. As a Syrian opposition representative said at the time of the Vienna talks: “How do they expect that after everything that has happened in Syria, people will just kiss each other in the streets?”⁴²

⁴⁰ Michael E O’Hanlon, ‘[Kerry’s counterproductive Syria strategy](#)’, Brookings Institution blog post, 14 November 2015

⁴¹ ‘[Walking the diplomatic high wire over Syria](#)’, *Washington Post*, 13 November 2015

⁴² [Syrian opposition: Vienna plan ‘kicks differences down the road’](#), EL-Araby el-Jadeed, 16 November 2015

8. Further reading

[‘Why Syrian opposition rejected the UN's plan for Syria’](#), *al-Monitor*, 12 October 2015

Joshua Keating, [‘U.S., Russia, and World Powers \(but Not Syrians\) Agree to Syria Peace Plan’](#), *Slate*, 14 November 2015

Michael E O’Hanlon, [‘Kerry’s counterproductive Syria strategy’](#), Brookings Institution blog post, 14 November 2015

[Walking the diplomatic high wire over Syria’](#), *Washington Post*, 13 November 2015

[The Syrian Jihad: An Interview with Charles Lister](#), Brookings Institution, November 25, 2015,

[The Syria Talks in Vienna: The Beginning of the End?](#), 30 October 2015
Lord Williams of Baglan, Chatham House

[Sound Strategy or Dodgy Dossier? Cameron’s Case for Syria Strikes](#), Shashank Joshi, RUSI *Commentary*, 26 November 2015

[IRAN’S POLICY ON SYRIA: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?](#), Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, RUSI *Commentary*, 13 November 2015

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