

Western-backed opposition agrees to talks amid defeats in Syria

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The Western-backed Syrian opposition, under pressure from its patrons in Washington, London and Europe and suffering mounting military reversals, has agreed to attend talks being convened by the US and Russia in Geneva aimed at brokering a political settlement to Syria's two-year-old civil war.

The vote to send a delegation to the conference, which has been dubbed Geneva II and is supposedly set to take place in mid-December, was taken at a meeting of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) in Istanbul on Monday.

The group of exile politicians, cobbled together by the US State Department and the Sunni monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, insisted, however, that a condition for its participation continued to be that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad play no role in any transitional regime. The government in Damascus has rejected any such requirement, insisting that Assad remains the president of Syria and his removal can only be decided by the Syrian people.

For its part, after pivoting away from an imminent military strike against Syria last September and its pursuit of negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program, Washington has dropped the previously repeated demand for Assad's removal, falling back to statements that he has lost "legitimacy" and suggesting that his removal from office will take place as part of the process of implementing any agreement coming out of the Geneva negotiations.

The SNC meeting in Damascus was held under the direct supervision of Washington, which sent US Syria envoy Robert Ford to ride herd over the Western-backed opposition. Syrian "activists" told the *New York Times* that Ford had told them they were confronted with a choice: "ISIS [the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] or the regime."

The ISIS and another Al Qaeda affiliate, the Al Nusra Front, have taken an ever more dominant role in the

armed opposition to the Syrian government, seizing territory in the north of the country and attempting to impose Islamist rule in territories that they occupy.

This is true in Raqqa, a city of some one million people, which has seen daily executions of suspected government supporters together with Alawites and members of other minorities. The BBC described it as "the largest city in the world to ever be controlled by al-Qaeda."

As for the so-called "moderates" that are described by the US and its puppets as loyal to the Syrian Opposition Council, they are largely invisible. In September, 11 armed anti-regime groups nominally part of the Free Syrian Army issued a joint statement pointedly disavowing any allegiance to the US-backed opposition front and publicly allying themselves with the Al Qaeda forces.

While it becomes increasingly evident that the SNC represents little if anything in terms of popular support from the Syrian people, tensions within the exile front has escalated sharply, expressing divisions between the body's Western and Saudi sponsors. The Saudi monarchy has publicly criticized both the Obama administration's pursuit of a negotiated political solution in Syria, following the agreement reached with Moscow on the destruction of the Assad regime's chemical weapons, and its tentative rapprochement with Iran.

It was reported that at Monday's meeting, Ahmed Jarba, the coalition's president, slapped a representative of the Free Syrian Army, Louay Mekdad, after the latter compared the coalition's voting process with the internal regime of Syria's ruling Baath Party.

After bowing to US pressure and voting to attend the conference in Geneva, the SNC acted against Washington's urgings in naming a "provisional government" to ostensibly govern "rebel"-controlled areas inside Syria. US officials opposed the action for potentially undermining the Geneva negotiations and pre-

empting a deal to set up a transitional regime in Damascus.

SNC officials acknowledged that Ahmed Tumej, the “moderate Islamist” named as the provisional government’s prime minister and other officials will exercise their supposed rule from the Turkish border town of Gaziantep, because they would be unable to defend themselves against either Syrian government forces or the Al Qaeda-affiliated militias.

The real purpose of this phony government was made clear with an announcement that it will receive \$300 million in assistance from Saudi Arabia, which is determined to keep the sectarian civil war going inside Syria.

Washington and the Western-backed “rebels” had repeatedly stalled the convening of Geneva II, which was to implement Geneva I, a broad agreement reached in June 2012 between the Western powers and Russia on forming a transitional government based upon the mutual consent of the opposition and the Assad regime. They had hoped that no such talks would be needed and that the US-NATO goal of regime change could be achieved either through the armed actions of the Western-backed militias or by means of direct US military intervention. In the meantime, the death toll in Syria has increased by more than five-fold.

Now, however, Washington sees some urgency in convening the conference, given the collapse of its attempts to organize a direct military intervention in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and the increasing rout of the “rebels” on the ground in Syria.

Government forces are scoring significant advances in both the countryside south of Damascus and just outside Aleppo, Syria’s second city and former commercial capital in the north. Syrian troops recaptured Hujaira, south of Damascus on Wednesday as part a string of victories that have pushed the Islamist-led militias out of areas that they have long held, threatening to cut off their supply lines.

And in Aleppo, government troops recaptured a strategic army base near the city’s airport that had been previously taken by the so-called rebels, and overran a number of other former strongholds of the armed opposition.

The “rebels” have responded with increasingly desperate attacks on Syria’s civilian population. Damascus residential neighborhoods have been subjected to random shelling, apparently aimed at non-Sunni populations. At least nine people were killed and 16

wounded by rocket and mortar attacks on Wednesday. And on Monday, four children riding in a school bus were killed along with their driver when they were hit with a mortar round in a predominantly Christian neighborhood. Four other children were wounded as well as two school administrators. Another mortar attack on the same day wounded 11 children at the St. John of Damascus school in the city’s Qassaa district.

While the killing and maiming of children by the “rebels” aroused none of the selective outrage that the Western media reserves solely for the Syrian regime, the United Nations condemned the attacks as “barbaric.”

“These barbaric acts must stop,” Maria Callvis, director for the Middle East and North Africa for the United Nations Children’s Fund, said in a statement. “All those with influence in Syria have a moral obligation to respect the sanctity of children’s lives and ensure that schools remain a place of safe refuge.”

Further complicating the situation for the US and its allies in Syria, ethnic Kurds in northeastern Syria announced the formation of an autonomous interim administration on Tuesday. The move follows military victories by the PYD (Democratic Union Party), a Kurdish militia aligned with the Turkish rebel group the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) over Al Qaeda-linked “rebels” who had attempted to seize control of the area, which borders Turkey.

The move led the SNC to declare the Kurdish group a “hostile” force. It accused it of “attacking units of the Free Syrian Army ... and of shirking the struggle against Assad’s regime.”

The PYD has also insisted that Kurds be represented separately at any talks in Geneva, a demand that has met with hostility from both Washington and its Syrian puppets.

Kurds comprise roughly 10 percent of Syria’s population. The development in northeastern Turkey has provoked consternation from Turkey’s government, which had backed the Islamist militias and fears that it will strengthen the PKK and the demand of Kurds for autonomy in Turkey itself.



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