

Syria conference, Iranian deal hang in balance as US steps up bullying

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Washington is intensifying efforts to use the forthcoming international conference on Syria as a mechanism to remove Bashar al-Assad's Baathist regime.

Over the objections of Russia, the Arab League, Turkey and other of its allies, Washington is blocking Iran's participation in the so-called Geneva II conference. Set to begin in Montreux, Switzerland on January 22, the UN sponsored, Russia-US co-chaired conference is charged with reaching a "political settlement" to the nearly three-year-old Syrian conflict.

Tehran, the US insists, will only be permitted to attend if it effectively throws its Syrian allies to the wolves by agreeing that the conference should be to organize a transfer of power in Damascus to a "transitional government" in which US-backed Islamist insurgents would have half the seats.

Washington is simultaneously seeking to reorganize the Syrian opposition. It is working to reconcile the Saudi-sponsored Islamic Front with what have hitherto been its preferred proxies in the war in Syria: the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Lacking widespread popular support, the US-sponsored insurgency against Assad has been thrown on the defensive and become ever-more dependent on Sunni Islamists, including tens of thousands of foreign fighters. The sectarian atrocities committed by Islamist forces including Al Qaeda-linked groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the al-Nusra Front, have only further discredited and isolated the insurgents among the Syrian people.

Yesterday, a two-day conference began in Cordoba, Spain of representatives of the Syrian insurgency—including the SNC, FSA, and Islamic Front—as well as opposition groups "that are tolerated

by Assad as they do not call for his removal," according to Reuters.

"The aim is to bolster dialogue between the groups and boost their cohesion ahead of Geneva II," explained Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

While formally sponsored by Spain's right-wing government, the hands of the US and France, Syria's former colonial overlord, are all over the Cordoba conference.

Particularly significant is the participation of representatives of the Islamic Front. Founded in November, the Islamic Front's constituent elements were until recently boasting about their collaboration with the ISIL terrorists.

The groups organized in the Islamic Front have long resented the fact that the US, in an attempt to give the insurgency a more acceptable "secular" face, insists that military aid to the "rebels" be distributed through the FSA's Supreme Military Command. However, the FSA's shrinking influence has caused the Obama administration to announce that it is considering a more direct partnership with the Islamic Front.

The FSA, in an effective admission of its own political and military dependence on reactionary Islamists, has itself called for increased collaboration with the Islamic Front—even though the Front in early December seized the FSA's northern Syrian headquarters and several warehouses of military supplies, forcing the FSA's leader General Salim Idris to flee to Turkey.

At a meeting last weekend, the SNC voted not to attend the Geneva II conference, on the grounds that the US and other Western powers had not done enough to overthrow Assad. They quickly rescinded that decision, however.

The US is moving to strengthen its partnership with

the Sunni Islamists of the Islamic Front even as it seeks to contain and suppress the influence in Syria and Iraq of other erstwhile Islamist allies, such as ISIL, and voices apprehension that Saudi-Iranian rivalry could lead to Sunni-Shia sectarian strife across the Middle East.

Iran reacted angrily to its exclusion from the Geneva II conference, viewing US Secretary of State John Kerry's statement that Tehran could perhaps "help" on the conference sidelines as an insult. However, its leaders continue to insist they are ready to assist in "stabilizing" the Middle East.

Indeed, a fundamental element in the Iranian bourgeois regime's pursuit of an accommodation with Washington is the offer of Tehran's assistance in advancing US strategic interests across the region, from Afghanistan to Lebanon, if Washington will agree to roll back punishing sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy and acknowledge Tehran as a regional player.

In what was clearly a response to a January 6 *New York Times* article that suggested the contrary, Iran categorically denied this week that it is sharing intelligence with Washington as part of efforts to shore up Iraq's Shia-dominated government.

Wherever the truth in that regard, it is both evident that Tehran, fearing an explosion of working-class protest over mass unemployment and inflation, is desperate to reach an accommodation with Washington, and on tenterhooks as the US and its allies seek to bully Iran into making ever larger concessions.

On Thursday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin, about "the situation in Syria in the context of preparations for the Geneva II conference, and implementation of agreements on the Iranian nuclear program."

In an interim agreement reached November 24, Tehran made sweeping concessions to the US and its allies, agreeing to cap and roll back much of its civilian nuclear energy program in exchange for \$7 billion worth of sanctions "relief", most of it being its own money currently frozen in the world banking system.

This agreement has not yet been implemented, however, because the US and its allies keep insisting on new guarantees aimed at ensuring the sanctions otherwise remain in full force and that Iran's nuclear program is further curtailed.

Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Deputy Foreign

Minister Abbas Araqchi, began two days of talks with EU and US officials in Geneva yesterday, aiming to having the 6-month agreement come into force on January 20. New "hitches" have reportedly emerged, however, as the Western powers seek to limit the right granted Iran in the November 24 agreement to continue research and development work on the centrifuges it uses to refine uranium.

Events in the Middle East are in flux. In September, the Obama administration came to the brink of a war on Syria that could have quickly led to a military confrontation with Iran and even Russia. It pulled back, so as to focus on its "pivot to Asia"—that is, US preparations for war against China—and to explore whether through bullying and diplomacy it could harness Iran to its strategic interests. This led to the November 24 interim nuclear deal.

But everything could quickly unravel, as the US ratchets up its demands and as its key regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, seek to scuttle the deal for fear that a US-Iran accommodation would undermine their own influence. Moreover, any "grand bargain" with Iran would be directed against the working class and oppressed masses of the Middle East—among whom there is deep opposition to concessions to US imperialist interests in the Iranian oil industry, and to US hegemony in the region.

French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius told France's parliament Thursday he hopes the Geneva II conference on Syria will take place, "but I'm not sure that it will."

He was insistent, however, that if it does take place, the only agenda would be the replacement of the Assad regime. "If Assad sends representatives (to Geneva II), the acceptance of the invitation means the acceptance of the mandate and the mandate is that a transitional government is created with full executive powers, that means Bashar al-Assad's powers."



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