

Syria talks deadlocked as US-backed opposition demands regime change

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The Geneva II talks on Syria were suspended early on Monday, after the Syrian government delegation presented a “declaration of principles” that did not mention a transfer of power to an organization including the US-backed opposition.

Feigning outrage, the pro-Western opposition’s chief negotiator, Hadi al Bahra, complained, “The declaration is outside the framework of Geneva, which centres on creating a transitional governing body.”

The Syrian opposition, backed by the United States, Europe, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey, cited a 2012 United Nations-backed motion urging Syria to form a transitional governing body and to hold free and fair elections. But this ultimatum for Bashar al Assad to step down was already rejected before talks even began last week.

Addressing the Geneva conference at it opened Wednesday, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared: “We need to deal with reality here. Bashar Assad will not be part of that transition government.”

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem replied, “No one in the world has the right to confer or withdraw the legitimacy of a president, a constitution or a law, except for the Syrians themselves.”

He was supported by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad added that the opposition’s insistence that Assad step down was obstructing the talks. “The problem is that these people do not want to make peace, they are coming here with pre-conditions,” he said.

Until Monday, therefore, talks had centred on whether Assad’s Baathist regime would allow aid convoys into the besieged opposition base in the city of Homs. Around 800 families are reportedly trapped there.

A provisional agreement was reached Sunday allowing women and children to leave the city, but the opposition forces insisted that “humanitarian corridors” be opened up instead—the same basis on which Western intervention in the former Yugoslavia was initially justified.

Opposition spokesman Monzer Akbik was backed in this demand by US State Department spokesman Edgar Vasquez. But Mekdad said that opposition groups were in fact preventing women and children from leaving Homs.

Neither was there agreement on opposition demands for the release of nearly 50,000 detainees they claimed the government is holding. Mekdad said the list of names submitted by the opposition was greatly exaggerated, and that the government had no children in its jails. The opposition also claimed it had no control over Islamist militants who have kidnapped hundreds of people.

On Sunday, Mekdad had said, “We are here to discuss terrorism, not a transfer of power... The president of the Syrian Arab Republic stays until the Syrian people says something else. This is a red line. If some people think we are coming here to give them the keys of Damascus, they are wrong.”

The government’s declaration issued Monday duly demanded that Syrians choose a political system without “imposed formulas” from outside.

Washington, knowing very well that its ultimatum to Assad would be rejected, sought to use it to ratchet up tensions, further destabilise the Middle East, and place maximum pressure on Iran.

Its duplicity on staging peace talks was made apparent when it chose to resume deliveries of “nonlethal” aid to the Syrian opposition that same day, just one month after Al Qaeda-linked forces seized

warehouses and forced Western powers, including the US and Britain, to temporarily end their shipments to the opposition.

Anonymous US officials said the aid was being sent through Turkey into Syria, with the coordination of the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council, led by Gen. Salim Idris. They stressed that the halt in supplies last month was only a "precautionary measure."

At the Davos summit, the 44th annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Switzerland that coincided with the Geneva talks, Kerry again struck a bellicose pose on Syria, Iran and the Middle East. He said in an interview that the military option was still on the table if Iran did not live up to its nuclear commitments, and that Assad could not be part of any future political arrangement in Syria.

The country "has become the world's single biggest magnet for jihad and terror," and the opposition would never stop fighting while he still rules.

On Friday, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, arriving at Davos, said the future of Syria should be decided by the Syrian nation and not by outside forces.

On Sunday, Iran—Syria's main ally—and the opposition's backers, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, all condemned the flood of foreign fighters into Syria, while denying that their country played any part in doing so. Syria's ambassador to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, had said two days earlier that his government had traced more than 500 Al Qaeda-linked fighters entering into Syria from Turkey, accusing Saudi Arabia of airlifting Sunni fighters into Syria from Yemen.

Also Sunday, Syrian Information Minister Omran Al-Zoubi explicitly blamed the US and its allies, especially Turkey and Qatar, for fuelling the civil war. "The US is involved through its intelligence agencies in a lot of what happened in Syria supported by Turkey and Qatar," he said.

Iranian Minister of Labor, Cooperatives and Welfare Ali Rabeiei said Tehran will continue supporting Syria and that the first step in stopping bloodshed was "a collective decision on the fight against terrorism."

The Syrian regime appears to be placing its hopes for a negotiated settlement on two things: the fact that they are clearly winning the civil war; and fear in the US and Europe that the opposition is dominated by al Qaeda-linked Islamists.

Earlier this month, Mekdad told the BBC that various

unnamed Western intelligence agencies have visited Damascus for talks on how to combat radical Islamist groups. There was a schism between security officials and the politicians pressing for Assad to step down. "I will not specify, but many of them have visited Damascus," he said.

Many Western governments now understood that there was no alternative to the leadership of Assad, he said, and some were approaching Syria on resuming diplomatic relations. BBC chief international correspondent Lyse Doucet commented January 16 that "informed sources say there have been meetings between Western and Syrian intelligence officials including Security Chief General Ali Mamluk."

"As this devastating war drags on, there is growing anxiety in many capitals over how to bring it to an end. As one Western official put it: 'This is a losing situation for absolutely everyone'," reported the BBC.

Writing in the *Daily Beast*, Frank G. Wisner, a former Under Secretary of State and of Defence and president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, supported a shift to a negotiated settlement.

"Face the Assad reality in Syria," he declared. "The Syria conference underway in Geneva to transition from the rule of President Assad will fail, and the Obama team knows it. There is no incentive now in the Assad or rebel camps for diplomatic compromise, and the US knows that...The reality on the ground today is that American-helped moderate rebels continue to flounder, while Assad's forces and those of the jihadi extremists prosper."

President Barak Obama was forced to back down from military intervention in Syria last year in face of public opposition, the threat of direct conflict with Russia and a possible region-wide war. But Kerry's constant resort to threats shows that only a fool would rule out Washington moving again towards war with Syria, if talks fail to significantly advance US designs on the region.



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