

US, Russia discuss possible coordination, political settlement in Syria

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21 September 2015

The US and Russia initiated high level talks last week apparently aimed at reaching a political settlement leading to some form of joint action over Syria, including possible coordination in support of a postwar government that may leave elements of Syria's current political elite in power.

The talks mark the first time high level military officials of both countries have met formally since the February 2014 US-orchestrated coup d'état in Ukraine and subsequent takeover of Crimea by Russian forces.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter spoke via telephone with Russian counterparts late last week. Discussions centered on joint efforts to avoid accidental clashes between US and Russian forces stationed inside Syria.

The US and Russian officials "agreed to further discuss mechanisms for deconfliction in Syria and the counter-ISIL campaign," said US Defense Department spokesman Peter Cook.

The military talks have been accompanied by renewed political and diplomatic meetings between the two powers, the latest in a series of meetings aimed at forging a deal over Syria in recent months.

"The Obama administration reached out to Moscow on Friday to try to coordinate actions in the war zone and avoid an accidental escalation," the *New York Times* reported on Friday.

"The president believes that a mil-to-mil conversation is an important next step. It will help to define some of the different options that are available to us," US Secretary of State John Kerry said in remarks Friday from London.

The past week also saw meetings between top US and Russian diplomatic personnel, including the US Ambassador in Moscow and ranking Russian diplomats.

The flurry of talks points to the existence of real concerns on both sides about a possible outbreak of direct fighting between US and Russian forces, the latter of which now include sizable troops of infantry, tanks, and combat aircraft. The situation on the ground is becoming ever more explosive, as Russia moves increasingly substantial forces and military hardware into naval and air bases in western

Syria.

Beyond the issues of military coordination, the talks indicate a new readiness on the part of Washington to accept a political settlement that would leave Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in power, at least temporarily.

The US feelers in the direction of a rapprochement over Syria come just weeks after US President Barack Obama harshly condemned Russia's moves in Syria, saying that Russia's Syrian deployments were "doomed to failure."

The US is hardly foreswearing a renewed offensive to violently depose Assad. Elements within the US ruling elite clearly still favor a course of aggressive escalation against Assad, as recent *Times* reports, written as usual as quasi-intelligence briefs intended to signal shifts in US strategic thinking, make clear.

"Russia is trying to change the security dynamic in the Middle East and demonstrating that it supports its allies to the hilt. The White House is sitting there and worrying about de-conflicting airplanes when we should be upping our efforts against Assad," former US ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey told the *Times* last week.

Statements by top Obama administration officials have indicated that the White House may currently be tilting toward a deal that stops short of Assad's removal.

"We need to get to the negotiation. That is what we're looking for and we hope Russia and Iran, and any other countries with influence, will help to bring about that, because that's what is preventing this crisis from ending," said Kerry.

"We're prepared to negotiate. Is Assad prepared to negotiate, really negotiate? Is Russia prepared to bring him to the table?" he said.

Referring to Assad's departure, Kerry said last week, "It doesn't have to be on day one or month one. There is a process by which all the parties have to come together and reach an understanding of how this can best be achieved."

These remarks illustrate the serious concerns within the White House over the evident failure of US military policy in the country, as Assad's departure has been considered an

essential precondition for any end to the war in US ruling circles since the war began.

Faced with the weakness of its own military position—most evident in the failure of its own efforts to train new “rebel” proxy forces—combined with an intensifying Russian military buildup in the country, Washington is signaling its possible readiness to back away from hardline demand’s for Assad’s removal.

In 2012, the Obama administration went so far as to categorically reject previous Russian proposals for a settlement that would remove Assad, clearly believing that US military and intelligence interventions in the country would rapidly bring about his overthrow.

Under current conditions, however, the violent breakup of Assad’s government would leave the field open for ISIS, Al Nusra front, and other Al Qaeda-linked militias to consolidate control over the country. US imperialism bears primary responsibility for the rise of these groups, yet the fact remains that such an outcome could produce further disastrous complications for US efforts to dominate and restabilize the region.

“After failing to impede the buildup by convincing nations to close their airspace to Russian transport planes—Bulgaria banned the flights but Iraq did not—the White House is trying to make the best out of a situation it feels it is powerless to prevent,” the *Times* noted in a report last week.

“The Pentagon has been unable to recruit and train a viable opposition to fight the Islamic State,” Middle East policy expert Andrew Tabler told the *Times*. “The positions of both Moscow and Washington’s proxies are worsening.”

Long-range strategic conflicts between Washington and Moscow make any agreement over Syria tenuous at best, Tabler cautioned.

“It’s hard to see how you turn convergence on tactical military issues into a collective and viable political strategy to stabilize Syria and end the war,” he said.

Russia has its own reasons to fear a takeover of the country by Islamist groups, as ISIS and other groups maintain ties to Chechen terrorists operating inside Russia itself, and Moscow rightly worries about the role such groups may play in future US machinations aimed at destabilizing and breaking up Russia as a unified state.

Moscow is nonetheless not absolutely committed to the defense of Assad, but instead views him as a key bargaining chip in its efforts to maintain its influence in the country, as the previous Russian offer in 2012 made clear.

Recent weeks have seen the Russian government expand its military presence in the west of Syria as a move to prevent an immediate collapse of Assad and strengthen their position in talks and maneuvers over the future of the regime, but this does not necessarily signify that Russia is

prepared to initiate a shooting war purely to defend Syria’s current rulers.

Obama administration officials “seem intent on exploring the closed-door comments by Russian diplomats that they are not wedded to the Syrian leader,” the *Times* reported on Friday.

Moscow is also concerned to maintain control over its naval base at Tartus, which served as a key strategic access point for Russia’s naval presence in the Mediterranean since Moscow acquired basing rights there in a 1971 deal with Damascus. Assad had agreed in 2008 to allow permanent basing of Russian forces at Tartus, according to Israeli intelligence reports, and Moscow transferred a contingent of cruisers and nuclear submarines to the base beginning in September of that year.

Russia has repeatedly dispatched new flotillas to the base since the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, including the deployment of more than a dozen ships in May 2013, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Spurred on by the flood of Syrian refugees into Europe, other regional players, including Germany and Turkey, are similarly pushing for a political deal that could involve both Russia and Iran as partners in crafting a framework for a post-war government.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier urged a political deal involving Turkey, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia during remarks from Berlin on Saturday.

After four years of failed efforts to remove Assad and with its “rebel” training programs foundering, Washington is desperately casting about for a tactical policy that will slow the drumbeat of US military debacles in the Middle East.

Even if a comprehensive political deal is reached over Syria, however, this would only temporarily suppress the contradictions that are driving the entire region ever closer toward conflagration.



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