

UN resolution papers over deep divisions on Syria

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19 December 2015

The United Nations Security Council Friday unanimously approved a draft resolution setting out a timetable for ending the nearly five-year civil war in Syria and negotiating a political solution to the crisis created by the Western-backed campaign for regime-change.

The resolution, which was drafted in an earlier meeting involving 20 foreign ministers, including US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as well as their counterparts from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, leaves the principal points of division between these powers unresolved.

It provides the bare bones of a process that is supposed to begin in early January with a simultaneous push for a ceasefire and the opening of talks between the government and opposition forces on the formation of a transitional government, which is supposed to be set up within six months. Then, 18 months after the start of the process, UN-supervised elections would take place.

The key questions—who would be included in the ceasefire, who would participate in the talks, who would comprise the transitional government, and who would be allowed to run in the election—are all left unanswered.

While Washington and its regional allies, principally Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have been arming and funding the collection of Al Qaeda-linked militias that serve as proxy forces in the Western-backed war for regime-change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has intervened militarily to provide air support to government forces attacking these militias. The Russian government of President Vladimir Putin is seeking to prevent the US and its allies from depriving Moscow of its one ally in the

Middle East.

The Obama administration has repeatedly insisted that no settlement is possible without Assad's ouster, a position reiterated by Obama at his end-of-the-year press conference Friday. For its part, Russia has supported Assad as a bulwark against "terrorism," and rejected any attempt by outside powers to determine the composition of Syria's government, saying Assad's fate is a matter for the Syrian people to decide.

Yet the name "Assad" is not mentioned in the draft resolution, much less any demand that he be removed from office, or, for that matter, that he be defended against foreign powers seeking to overthrow him. Nor does it specify whether the Syrian president would be eligible to run for re-election.

In the UN Security Council session, Secretary of State Kerry acknowledged the continued split on the question of Assad, saying, "There obviously remain sharp differences within the international community, especially about the future of President Assad." He added, "President Assad, in our judgment, and not everybody shares this ... has lost the ability and the credibility to be able to unite the country."

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stressed that the resolution adopted by the council establishes that the political transition is to be led by Syrians, which, he said, represents a "clear response to attempts to impose a solution from the outside ... on any issues, including those regarding its president."

Further complicating the issue is the position taken by the collection of militia leaders and Western-controlled exile politicians recently brought together by the Saudi monarchy in Riyadh that Assad must be removed from power at the start of any transitional regime.

This position was stated on the eve of the UN session by Riad Hijab, who was selected in Riyadh as the

“chief coordinator” of the anti-Assad coalition cobbled together by the Saudis. “Assad and his government must not be in power, the transitional period has to be without him, and he must be tried for his crimes,” declared Hijab.

Hijab was appointed prime minister by Assad in 2012, but two months thereafter he defected, reportedly taking cash offered by French intelligence and the Qatari monarchy as an incentive to senior Syrian officials to join the Western-backed drive for regime-change.

The status of these so-called “rebels” themselves is the second major point dividing their sponsors, the US and its regional allies, from Russia and Iran, which back the Assad government.

The UN resolution indicates that “terrorist groups” will be excluded from any ceasefire offered to the opposition, but which groups are terrorist and which ones are opposition is left unspecified. While both sides agree that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) falls in the terrorist category, there are sharp conflicts over the status of other Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces.

Washington has long been loathe to specify which groups it considers terrorist and which ones constitute the so-called “moderate opposition.” US officials have repeatedly denounced Russia for attacking “non-ISIS targets” without ever specifying what groups it believed should not be struck.

The Kingdom of Jordan, which was given the task of assembling a list of terrorist groups in Syria, reported that a number of countries it approached had handed over lists of 15, 20 or more organizations that they believed should be included in the terrorist category.

The Jordanian terrorist list reportedly includes several organizations the US Central Intelligence Agency has been arming and funding, as well as groups that were brought together in Riyadh in the Saudi-sponsored attempt to create a unified opposition.

Kerry said Friday that the ceasefire would exclude ISIS as well as the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, together with “any other group that we might decide at some time to designate.”

Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh said he believed there would be “follow-up steps” on the terrorist list, with “countries meeting again to set criteria which will help filter the list.”

Jordan reportedly listed along with ISIS and the

Nusra Front groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist formation founded by a senior Al Qaeda follower, as well as other Islamist formations such as Fajr al-Islam, Jaish al-Islam, Jund al-Aqsa and the Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki group.

Even as the UN Security Council was voting on a resolution touted as a road to peace in Syria, developments on the Syrian-Turkish border, long the conduit for ISIS and other Islamist militias as well as for arms and recruits, threatened to turn the conflict into the flashpoint for a global conflagration.

NATO announced Friday that it had agreed to send warplanes and warships to Turkey, a NATO member, to build up the country’s air defenses on the Syrian border. “We have agreed on a package of assurance measures for Turkey in view of the volatile situation in the region,” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told Reuters.

The buildup comes in the wake of Turkey’s November 24 shoot-down of a Russian warplane in the border area, in what was a deliberate ambush prepared in close consultation with Washington.

Meanwhile, the Russian military has deployed its advanced S-400 air defense system at the Syrian airbase in Hmeimim, less than 17 miles from the Turkish border. The weapons system, which is capable of targeting as many as 36 aircraft simultaneously, gives Russia the capacity to fire on any Turkish plane threatening its forces, potentially triggering a direct military confrontation with the nuclear-armed NATO powers.



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