

Russian-backed Syrian peace talks reach deal on constitution as US discusses escalating conflict

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At Russian-sponsored peace talks on the Syrian conflict held this week in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, participants reached a deal to negotiate a new constitution for the war-ravaged country. A day after the conclusion of the talks, which were boycotted by the United States, France and Britain, the Trump administration raised new and unsubstantiated claims that the Assad regime is developing chemical weapons, raising the prospect of yet another American military attack.

The agreement will give Russia, Turkey and Iran, the three countries backing the Sochi dialogue, significant influence in shaping the constitutional committee. The three countries will each provide a list of 50 nominees from which committee members will be selected. Syria's High Negotiating Committee (HNC), the UN-recognised opposition group, will also have representation.

HNC representatives refused to attend the conference, claiming they were being excluded from the process. They remained at the airport in protest after being confronted with the use of the current Syrian flag and other symbols of the Assad regime in advertising for the gathering. There were even divisions at the gathering itself, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov being heckled during his remarks.

The presence at the talks of the UN's Syria envoy, Staffan de Mistura, was an acknowledgement of the weakened position of the US and its Western allies in Syria, where the Assad regime has relied on support from Russia and Iran to remain in power. If the next round of UN talks in Geneva accepts the proposal to negotiate a new constitution, it will be interpreted as a victory for Moscow at Washington's expense, since the future of the Assad regime will be deferred until a later date.

But whatever the result of future talks, it will do nothing to resolve the rapidly intensifying imperialist and great power rivalries that are intertwined with the Syrian conflict and stretch across the entire Middle East region. The US, under Obama, incited the Syrian civil war in 2011, which has

claimed over half a million lives, with the aim of bringing about regime change in Damascus. This was part of a longer-term strategy, launched with the first Gulf War over a quarter century ago, to consolidate its unchallenged control over the energy-rich and strategically important Middle East against its main competitors, Russia and China. The US-instigated wars have claimed the lives of millions of people and forced millions more from their homes.

The Trump administration acknowledged the true character of the Syrian intervention with last month's National Defence Strategy, which openly proclaimed the chief threat to US imperialist interests not to be the bogus "war on terror," which has been used to justify a series of criminal wars since 9/11, but the growing danger of great power conflicts.

Washington has manifestly failed to achieve its goals in Syria and throughout the Middle East. Not only has Russia, determined to prevent the collapse of its chief Middle East ally, expanded its presence in Syria, but Iran has also broadened its regional influence and come close to opening up a land bridge from Tehran to Lebanon. In addition, divisions have sharpened between the US and its erstwhile European allies, which, led by Germany, are ever more openly advancing their own imperialist ambitions in the Middle East independently of the US.

A breach has also opened between the US and its ostensible NATO ally Turkey. As talks opened in Sochi, fighting continued to rage throughout the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northern Syria, close to Turkey's border. Last month, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ordered Turkish forces into Syria to force Kurdish units aligned with the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) out of Afrin and the border areas. Turkey views the PYD fighters as the Syrian section of the Kurdistan Workers Party, against which Ankara has waged a bloody crackdown for over three decades.

The fighting is increasingly pitting Turkish forces and their Free Syrian Army allies against the Kurdish militants, who

have been trained and supplied by US troops. Although Washington attempted to avoid a direct clash between NATO allies by cynically declaring that the Kurdish fighters in Afrin are not US allies, it warned Turkey not to attack Kurdish forces in the city of Manbij to the east, where US special forces are stationed. Erdogan has repeatedly indicated his intention to move Turkish forces to Manbij as part of a push to clear the PYD fighters out of the border region and prevent the establishment of a Kurdish-controlled zone on Ankara's doorstep.

Assad's forces are also carrying out an onslaught on Islamist militants in Idlib province that has claimed an estimated 200 civilian lives over recent weeks.

Under these highly volatile conditions, which even the *New York Times* admitted in a January 31 editorial could trigger a wider regional war, the US ruling elite is discussing ways to further escalate the conflict in order to prevent Washington from being side-lined. Last month, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered remarks in which he committed the US to permanently stationing military personnel in Syria.

Casting aside the fraudulent pretext for the US presence in Syria—to combat ISIS—Tillerson denounced Iran and Russia for expanding their influence in the country. He also vowed that the US would rely on Islamist proxies, including remnants of ISIS, in the east of the country to block Iranian expansion.

In what amounts to a deliberate provocation, and an attempt to scuttle the Russian-backed talks, anonymous Trump administration officials briefed the media Thursday with unverified claims that the Assad regime is developing a new chemical weapons arsenal. They also accused Syria of producing new weapons to escape international regulations.

Allegations of chemical weapons production or use have invariably been employed by Washington to ratchet up war tensions and launch military strikes. Last April, Trump seized on reports of an alleged chemical weapons attack by the regime, an incident which remains shrouded in mystery, to justify the raining down of 55 cruise missiles on a military base.

That a similar or even more deadly attack could well be in the works was indicated by the remarks of one of the officials, who said, "It will spread if we don't do something."

Moreover, the latest unproven allegations come as substantial sections of the ruling elite are urging the Trump administration to adopt an even more aggressive line towards the Syria conflict and the wider Middle East.

The *Times*' January 31 editorial attacked the Trump administration's Syria policy, proclaiming in the arrogant tone of imperialist conquerors that the US is "shirking its

responsibility for Syria's political future." "As the Turks and Kurds face off, Mr. Assad is pushing to reassert control over Syria, while Russia and Iran maneuver to ensure they will have a permanent presence and influence in the country," the *Times* concluded.

In other words, if the US continues to "shirk its responsibility," i.e., fail to deploy a military force large enough to secure Washington's neo-colonial domination over the region and, if necessary, go to war with Russia and Iran, other powers will take advantage of the power vacuum that will emerge in the Middle East to push back American imperialism.

An article published in *Politico Magazine* by Charles Lister and William Wechsler, both senior fellows at the Washington-based Middle East Institute think tank, argued along similar lines. The real issue, they bluntly declared, was not so much Syria but control over the wider region and the exclusion of potential rivals.

While they praised Trump and Tillerson for permanently deploying American military might to Syria, Lister and Wechsler warned, "As with Obama—who declared in 2011 that Assad must go yet consistently rejected calls for a more assertive approach—there is no indication that Trump's team has developed or begun to implement a strategy to match its grand goals, nor that it plans to deploy the resources necessary to accomplish them."

What Lister and Wechsler are calling for is the all-out mobilisation of the US war machine for a conflict which would not only engulf the long-suffering Middle East in a new conflagration, but rapidly draw in Washington's imperialist and regional rivals into a catastrophic war that would dwarf the two world wars of the last century.



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