

How U.S. Concessions Threaten the Syria Peace Talks Before They Start

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



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Diplomacy is shaped by facts on the ground, not the reverse, so Washington must be prepared to alter those facts by increasing its support for the opposition or expanding its own military involvement.

U.S. officials are scrambling to convene another round of talks aimed at ending the war in Syria that has killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and reinvigorated a global jihadist movement. Without firmer U.S. support of the Syrian opposition, and measures to dent the confidence of the Syrian regime and its supporters, these talks are doomed, like previous rounds, to end in failure.

To casual observers, the horrors of the Syrian conflict may seem relatively unchanging. In fact, much has changed in Syria in the four months since the Russian military began intervening on behalf of Bashar al-Assad. Rebel advances had left the Syrian president in danger of losing vital portions of his regime's heartland. Relentless Russian aerial bombardment, however, has the rebels slowly retreating, allowing the regime to regain lost territory and confidence.

Russian airstrikes have been complemented by a ground campaign led by the Syrian army and its associated paramilitaries, as well as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its proxies, notably Hezbollah and Shiite militiamen from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Russian bombing campaign -- which replaced a relatively sporadic air campaign by Syria's feeble air force -- and the encirclement of towns by Assad forces have worsened the humanitarian situation. Scenes of starving children in Madaya and elsewhere and thousands of refugees crowding at the Syria-Jordan border show the effects of the regime's tactics.

And in the face of this onslaught, U.S. policy positions have steadily retreated. "Assad must go" has been replaced by "Assad can stay through a transitional period." Secretary of State John Kerry is reportedly considering allowing Mr. Assad to stand for re-election at the end of such a period. Given the Assad regime's history of rigging votes, this would be a recipe for perpetuating its rule.

These concessions would also move the U.S. toward the positions of Russia and Iran, and further from its allies in Europe and the Middle East. The Syrian opposition has balked, hesitating to join the new round of peace talks until two key conditions are met.

First, the rebels want the siege of civilian populations and Russian bombardment to stop for the duration of the talks. This would allow food and other aid to reach civilians and would be consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which Moscow supported. It also makes strategic sense: If the tactics are not suspended, Mr. Assad and his allies will be able to improve their position on the ground and sap opposition support under the cover of the talks.

Second, the opposition wants Mr. Assad's status to be part of the agenda. Resolution 2254, passed last month, sets "inclusive and nonsectarian governance" as the objective of negotiations. But Syrians did not take up arms merely for the sake of good governance; they were rebelling against a brutal dictatorship, and they are right to be skeptical that citizens will experience any improvement while Mr. Assad remains in power. If Bashar Assad's position is non-negotiable, the rebels will see little reason for negotiating and the conflict will continue.

The Obama administration has urged the opposition to drop these demands. U.S. officials may see this as a matter of expediency -- the bitter price that must be paid to end the war. Such a view is shortsighted.

The opposition has recently taken steps toward the unity that Washington has long urged, organizing an umbrella group under Saudi auspices. Failing to support the rebels' demands would undermine this nascent unity and weaken the opposition: Some actors will acquiesce, but others will go their own way. This serves the interests of Mr. Assad and his supporters -- illustrated by Moscow's push to add to the opposition delegation figures from outside the Saudi-organized group who are regarded as pro-regime -- but is counter to U.S. interests. If the U.S. is to finally vanquish the Islamic State and to avoid any sort of Western occupation force in eastern Syria, we will ultimately have to rely on these opposition fighters to hold territory that is liberated. If we alienate the Syrian opposition, many may gravitate toward the groups we hoped they would fight: ISIS and al Qaeda.

The role of an evenhanded mediator can be left to UN envoy Staffan de Mistura. It's in U.S. interests to, in tandem with European and regional allies, provide the Syrian opposition with the backing it seeks. Diplomacy is shaped by facts on the ground, not the reverse. To ultimately succeed, we must be prepared to take steps to alter those facts, whether by increasing our support for the opposition or increasing incrementally our own military involvement.

If we do these things, the opposition will have confidence to negotiate, we will have credibility to press the rebels for compromises down the line, and Mr. Assad and his backers will have incentive to seek a diplomatic solution. If we do not, the U.S. will have little choice but to accept the realities being created by Mr. Assad and his allies in the Russian and Iranian governments. This would be no solution at all. Instead, it would, as the situation in Iraq demonstrates, merely fuel the Sunni grievances on which jihadist groups feed, perpetuating rather than solving a conflict that threatens millions in the Middle East and in the West.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog 'Think Tank' (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/01/28/how-u-s-concessions-threaten-the-syria-peace-talks-before-they-start>). " ❖

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