

# Russia's Self-Serving Approach to Syrian Peace Talks

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Brief Analysis

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**If Washington's Syria policy continues to waver, Moscow will keep advancing an agenda that boosts its international reputation, diverts attention from Ukraine, addresses its domestic terrorism concerns, and keeps Assad in power.**

**A**ccording to regional and Russian press reports, Moscow recently supplied six MiG-31 interceptors to the Syrian regime as part of an arms deal originally brokered in 2007. The jets arrived against a backdrop of renewed diplomatic activity on the Syrian conflict, including discussion of a Geneva III peace conference. While the West remains ambivalent, Moscow has hosted a series of meetings on the issue, and it would likely use Geneva III as another forum to address its own interests rather than work toward a genuine breakthrough.

## RECENT RUSSIAN TALKS

**A**fter the 2012 and 2014 international peace talks in Geneva failed to produce a resolution, Moscow hosted two rounds of what it called "consultative inter-Syrian" discussions earlier this year, on January 26-29 and April 6-9. Although some members of Syria's opposition and civil society attended these discussions alongside representatives of the Assad regime, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) -- the main Western-backed opposition group -- was absent. The group rejected the talks because President Bashar al-Assad's departure was not a precondition, and because it distrusted the "token" opposition members Moscow had involved.

According to the Kremlin, the talks were based on the principles of the June 2012 Geneva Communique, which outlined a UN roadmap for ending the violence and establishing a Transitional Governing Body (TGB). The communique is imprecise about which opposition groups can be included in the TGB -- a purposeful ambiguity installed at Russia's insistence. This has allowed Moscow to engage with its preferred groups and individuals -- namely, ones who do not demand Assad's departure -- and reinforce its position that Assad is a necessary partner in the fight against the "Islamic State"/ISIS.

## **PRAISE IN MOSCOW BUT NO REAL PROGRESS**

Upon the conclusion of the January talks, the attendees adopted an eleven-point proposal called the "Moscow Principles" or "Moscow Platform." Although the document reasserted the principles of the Geneva Communique, it emphasized Moscow's position of nonintervention in Syrian affairs, asserting the "unacceptability of any foreign military presence on Syrian territory without the consent of the Syrian government."

Yet the participants could not agree on the proposal's definitions of "terrorism" and "external interference," and some opposition members did not support the document at all. One attendee reportedly felt it "destroyed" hope for a genuine political solution. As a result, the talks did not lead to any specific steps for resolving the crisis.

The April talks likewise failed to produce any real progress. According to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency, the participants agreed on a six-point plan that once again emphasized their commitment to the Geneva Communique while also calling for a democratic political transition, an immediate end to military operations, the resolution of "all humanitarian disasters," and a commitment to fighting terrorism. Yet the talks did not move beyond this general agreement.

Despite the continued impasse, Moscow publicly praised both rounds of talks. On April 9, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that the second round offered "evidence of progress in the Moscow process." Similarly, the head of the Syrian government delegation, Bashar Jaafari, reportedly praised the talks for helping the attendees agree "on some points." Russia's UN ambassador, Alexey Borodavkin, went further in May, reportedly stating that both rounds were successful "not only from the point of view that a discussion between the Syrian government and the opposition took place," but also because they "launched a process of political talks and meetings on the Syrian settlement" (referring to international discussions that month to assess the possibility of a Geneva III conference). At least one opposition participant, Qadri Jamil, reportedly praised the Moscow meetings as well, but his loyalties are questionable given his reputation as "Putin's man in Syria."

## **RENEWED DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY, LITTLE AGREEMENT**

In early July, Moscow expressed readiness to host a third round of inter-Syrian discussions. That same month, UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura proposed four UN-led working groups to begin discussion on implementing the Geneva roadmap.

On August 3, Secretary of State John Kerry met with Lavrov and Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir in Qatar to discuss both Syria and, according to Russia's Foreign Ministry, "a wide antiterrorist front." Two days later, Lavrov and Kerry met in Malaysia at a conference held by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, where they discussed "a range of issues of mutual concern."

During the conference, Lavrov told reporters that he and Kerry view ISIS as a "common threat." Yet he also noted, "For now we don't have a joint approach on how specifically we can [fight ISIS] given the standoff between various players on the ground, including armed units of the Syrian opposition." And on August 9, he strongly criticized Washington's insistence that Assad must go. Lavrov then met with Jubeir in Moscow on August 11 as a follow-up to the Qatar meeting, but again failed to reach an agreement because of Moscow's continued support for Assad.

Meanwhile, the SNC reversed its position and accepted an invitation to meet in Moscow on August 13, perhaps out of fatigue and frustration. According to Russian press reports, SNC president Khaled Khoja said that Moscow is not "clinging" to Assad, but is instead concerned about "preserving Syria as a country [and] preventing anarchy." Yet ultimately this is no different from Russia's traditional position, as the Kremlin always says it opposes "external interference" in Syria, implying opposition to Assad's removal. Furthermore, after meeting with Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Moscow on August 17, Lavrov himself said that Russia's position on Syria and

Assad "has not changed," and that demands for Assad's departure are an "unacceptable" precondition for peace talks.

## MIXED U.S. SIGNALS CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MOSCOW

**U.**S. officials continue to waver between insisting that Assad must go, tacitly accepting him as part of the peace process, and focusing on the anti-ISIS fight. During the Qatar meeting, Kerry stated that Assad has "no role in Syria's future" and accused him of fostering the growth of ISIS, according to a press briefing by State Department spokesman Mark Toner earlier this month. At an August 4 briefing, however, Toner seemed to qualify those remarks: "We've been very adamant about the fact that [the political process] can't include Assad. He's lost all legitimacy. But we need to see a political resolution to the situation [in Syria]. We've had, I think, positive discussions with, among others, the Russians."

Meanwhile, Moscow continues to emphasize that Assad is indispensable to fighting ISIS, despite recent reports that it was showing more flexibility on that point. In June, President Putin proposed a plan for a united "antiterror front" against ISIS that entailed cooperation with Assad. And when U.S. forces launched unilateral airstrikes in Syria through a Turkish air base without permission from Damascus, Lavrov criticized the move as a "foreign intervention" that should end.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**A**s long as Washington remains unwilling to become more involved in supporting the fight against the Assad regime, the Kremlin will continue to advance an agenda that serves its own interests: namely, creating a perception of Russia as a credible and constructive mediator and international partner; diverting attention from its aggression in Ukraine; and allowing Putin to sidestep the Geneva process and keep Assad in power.

Similarly, Putin's call for an international anti-ISIS coalition is at least partly aimed at boosting Russia's own fight against militants in the North Caucasus, some of whom have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Such an effort could also legitimize Moscow's heavy-handed policies in that region, which helped produce radicalization there in the first place.

As for Geneva III, Moscow came no closer to a solution in January or April than the Geneva I and II talks did in past years, so a change in format alone is unlikely to make the next conference successful. Rather, the Kremlin would probably use Geneva III to pursue its own interests -- that is, demonstrating Russian influence and redirecting the discussion toward fighting ISIS in the manner Putin envisions, rather than truly working toward ending the violence in Syria.

Accordingly, the United States should emphasize to Russia that it cannot be a genuinely constructive international partner unless it looks beyond its interests and adheres to the spirit of the Geneva Communique, which saw Assad as part of the problem in Syria, not part of the solution. It should not allow Moscow to redirect the conversation away from this goal.

At the same time, Washington should recognize that joint diplomatic efforts with Russia have their limits when it comes to Syria. As the recent MiG-31 delivery shows, Moscow is unlikely to reverse its position on Assad. And simply gathering the players at the table is no substitute for real progress -- another broad peace conference has little chance of producing a breakthrough. Instead, other factors show more promise of influencing Moscow's policy. For example, as Russia's economy continues to decline, so will its ability to help Assad. In this context, the United States should not give Putin a free pass on Ukraine in exchange for cooperation on Syria.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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