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What to Expect from Syria Peace Talks in Moscow

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While the talks are unlikely to produce immediate results, Moscow could use them to gain leverage to shape its preferred outcome in Syria.

After two rounds of peace talks in Geneva failed to resolve the Syrian crisis, Moscow proposed in December 2014 its own peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. Earlier this month, Russian deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov confirmed that the talks would take place January 26-29, according to Russian press reports. Bogdanov has described the talks as "consultative" and "preparatory," without any preconditions or set agenda. They could, he said, lead to more concrete discussions. Although the United States is not participating in the Moscow talks, U.S. secretary of state John Kerry expressed hope on January 14 in Geneva that they "could be helpful."

Who Will Attend

Details about the meeting remain sparse. According to Bogdanov, Moscow sent approximately thirty invitations to members of the Syrian opposition. Russian sources confirm that the Syrian government is ready to meet with the opposition in Moscow, although it is unclear who precisely will attend. Recent reports indicate that UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura may send his deputy, Ramzi Ezzeddine Ramzi. On January 17, a Russian press report referencing comments by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov indicated that "no one has completely refused" to participate in the talks.

The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) -- the main Western-backed Syrian opposition group -- has rejected the talks, but Moscow can justify holding them nonetheless. The Geneva Communique, adopted in June 2012 at an international Syria peace conference, outlines a UN road map for ending violence in Syria. This road map calls to establish a transitional government body (TGB) that would "exercise full executive powers." It would consist of "members of the present government and

the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent." Indeed, the imprecision here regarding which opposition groups can be included in the TNG could give Moscow an opportunity to include its preferred groups -- namely, those not demanding the departure of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad as a precondition for the talks.

Iran, for its part, appears supportive. Deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian reportedly said during a December visit to Moscow that Iran supported "Moscow's idea of talks between the government and the moderate opposition."

Ensuring Support for Assad

Although the United States has repeatedly called for Assad to step down, the ambiguity in the 2012 Geneva Communique leaves open the possibility that Assad could remain part of a future solution to the Syrian crisis. Like Russia, Iran wants its longtime ally Assad to stay in power, and talks in Moscow without the SNC could help implicitly reinforce this idea.

Assad himself has expressed support for Russia's efforts. "We are confident that any Russian diplomatic initiative will be based on the principles of respect for our national sovereignty," he said, according to a Russian press report after Bogdanov's December visit to Damascus. And in an exclusive December interview with the French weekly *Paris Match*, Assad explained, "The main task of Syria's top political leadership is to avoid directly depending on the Western powers." Holding talks in Moscow hold just such a benefit for the Syrian leader.

Russian president Vladimir Putin, for good reason, is particularly sensitive to any suggestions that longtime leaders should leave office under pressure. For several years now, the Kremlin-controlled Russian press has been warning about the "dangers" and "chaos" that would ensue if Assad were to go.

Future Opportunities for Moscow

Talks in Moscow appear too vague and preliminary to yield any immediate results. However, in the long term, the talks could potentially allow Moscow to gain a number of advantages.

With the Syrian conflict now approaching its fourth anniversary, the humanitarian situation has grown increasingly dire, requiring urgent relief efforts throughout the region. In addition, advances by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have diverted Western focus away from removing Assad and toward alleviating the immediate crisis, even as Western leaders still say Assad should step down.

In the apparent absence of a clearly defined Western policy toward the Syrian conflict, and perhaps exploiting Syria fatigue, Russia has seized an opportunity to advance its own diplomatic agenda. This could include presenting the idea of Assad as the only viable alternative to either victory by Islamist extremists or complete state collapse. At the same time, Moscow could seek to reinforce its claim as a key international actor shaping critical world decisions in a reemerging "multipolar world" envisioned by Putin.

Western Ambiguity and Its Implications

While Russia has been largely consistent in its Syria policy since the 2011 outset of the conflict -- maintaining firm support for Assad -- the West has wavered between demands that the Syrian leader step down and tacit acceptance of him as part of the peace process. Responding to a question about whether or not the United States had encouraged the Syrian opposition to attend the Moscow talks, State Department deputy spokesperson Marie Harf said on January 12, "I can check and see...[W]e believe anything that gets us towards real progress is good."

Continued Western ambiguity or silence can create the perception of disinterest at best, if not a preference for some non-Western actor to take the lead in resolving the crisis. Absent a clear and consistent Western policy, Russia's position may simply prevail as the only available option.

While Russian officials often pay lip service to the importance of international law, the Kremlin only insists on such adherence when it agrees with Moscow's interests. Although the Geneva process is vague on the possibility of Assad remaining as part of a transitional government, its goal was to create a road map toward peace and democracy for Syria, an outcome that implied Assad's departure.

The upcoming talks in Moscow may invoke the Geneva Communique, but the Kremlin clearly wants to move away from this process as it is currently defined. Despite the lack of a formal agenda for the Moscow talks, both the Kremlin and Damascus have reportedly emphasized that they should focus on the "fight against terrorism." Both also describe "terrorists" as any armed opposition against Assad.

Policy Recommendations

If Putin gets his way and Assad remains in power, such an outcome would have serious consequences. These would include discrediting Westerners who demanded Assad's ouster, revealing the international community as indecisive and unreliable for others in Russia or Russia's orbit who might envision ousting dictators, allowing Putin to suggest renewed international legitimacy despite U.S. and European anger at Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and revitalizing Russia as a dominant diplomatic player on the international stage.

The United States, which seems to be taking a wait-and-see approach, should instead reiterate that Assad must eventually go. Washington should make clear to Moscow that Russia can play an important and helpful role if it facilitates Assad's departure as part of the transition called for in the Geneva Communique. Insisting that Assad is part of the problem rather than part of the solution would also deepen support for the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign in Syria. Many ordinary Syrians, as well as Turks and Gulf Arabs, are unenthusiastic about the campaign because they see Assad as its beneficiary.

The United States should signal to Russia, Iran, and Assad's regime an unambiguous and long-term commitment to opposing sectarian slaughter in Syria, whether by Assad or ISIS. A congressional authorization to use military force in Syria could send such a message. For Assad, U.S. willingness to use force against ISIS could suggest future willingness to target his own air force.

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