



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Vienna Path: the Chances of a Solution and the Challenges for the Syrian Opposition

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Nov 2015

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## Introduction

The second round of the Syria peace talks in Vienna were held on October 30, 2015, within a week of the close of the first round. This new, expanded set of negotiations now brought together all of the states active in or connected to the Syrian crisis, including specifically Iran. The participants were able to issue a nine point communique that set out the general framework for the anticipated political solution in Syria. The third Vienna meeting, which convened on November 14 and brought together representatives of seventeen states, the UN, and the EU, reflected a regional and international consensus through a statement which included a road map and a timetable to enforce the political solution in Syria along two parallel tracks. The first calls for the launch of a political process leading to ending the conflict that has been underway for almost five years. The second calls for unified regional and international efforts to confront extremism and terrorist groups.

## Two Parallel Paths to the Solution

The idea of the path to a political solution running in parallel with the fight against terrorism formed was shared by all of the regional and international parties active in the Syrian crisis. It reformulated the Russian proposal that was based on Moscow's sense of "abundant power" arising from its military intervention in Syria, where it has attempted to change the balance of forces on the ground and impose a political solution in line with its conception of the conflict. Central to this has been Russia's adoption of the "war on terror" discourse and an expanded list of targeted organizations in Syria. The Vienna statement affirmed the need for the states involved to agree which factions and groups active in Syria would be designated as terrorist organizations. Jordan was tasked to draft the list of such groups with the assistance of the intelligence agencies of states that are party to the Vienna process, a task to be completed before the launch of the political process. The Russian side benefited from the Paris attacks, which occurred on the eve of the latest Vienna meeting and which were claimed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL). This event allowed Moscow to push for the adoption of its own perspective and for the fight against terrorism to be made the main element of both the Syrian conflict and the agreement in Vienna.

The Russian proposal would not have passed without being amended to take into account the views of the states sponsoring the opposition and without the stipulation that the political track for solving the Syrian crisis is the other necessary element for the successful confrontation of terrorism. According to this approach, terrorism is the result and not the cause of the conflict raging in Syria. Had it not been for the viciousness of the regime and its use of extreme violence, including chemical weapons, to suppress a non-violent revolution, as well as the regime's decision to turn to Iranian-backed sectarian militia for help, terrorism would not have flourished and its mobilization and funding capacities would not have grown to that extent that it can now strike at great distances. Accordingly, and in parallel with the agreement to classify and confront terrorist groups, the necessity of a political resolution to the Syrian crisis was also a point of mutual agreement. A three-stage timetable was set out, which envisaged a UN-sponsored negotiations process beginning in early 2016 and ending in December, 2017. This first phase will produce an agreement over mechanisms for a ceasefire. Two further stages will see the declaration of a political process leading to "credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections" for parliament and president to be administered under UN supervision, with all Syrians, both at home and abroad—in refugee camps or as integrated migrants—taking part.

## Vienna: a Chance for a Solution or Just a Path to a Distant Resolution

Nearly five years since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, and in the absence of a credible political resolution, the international and regional parties active in the Syrian crisis have been careful not to allow any disruption to the on-the-ground military balance of powers. No party has allowed the defeat of its allies or the victory of its enemies. This tendency became clearly apparent after Russia's direct military intervention on the side of the regime, after international parties backing the opposition increased their level of support, foiling Russia's plans to fundamentally change the balance of power on the ground. The failure of Russia's intervention to alter the balance of powers, Moscow's fear of being drawn into a war of attrition in Syria, the growing threat of ISIL, the worsening of the Syrian refugee crisis, and the transformation of Syria into a security, economic, and moral headache encouraged the shift towards the Vienna pathway, breathing new life into a political process that had been faltering since the series of talks which began in Geneva in 2012. Other factors also led Russian President Vladimir Putin to preemptively impose his conditions for a solution in Syria,

including signs of change on the regional and international scene following the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue and Tehran's return to the international fold. These developments have opened the door for a restructuring of the regional order, and a rearrangement of the roles of the actors in it, in addition to the approach of the U.S. presidential elections. Further hastening this movement have been the signs of fragmentation and disintegration within the regime, and indications of the imminent collapse of the Syrian army, as well as the failure of Iran and its allies to change the geography of control on the ground.

The ineffectiveness of the Washington-led coalition against ISIL has been successfully used in Russian diplomacy to justify intervention in Syria. Russia is also trying to use this fact to impose a political solution, now that it has become a key and indispensable player in determining the future of Syria. This makes Moscow an indispensable port of call for any political and diplomatic moves seeking to solve the Syrian crisis, whose results have started to impact directly on regional and global security. This meant that common ground has been achieved constituting the practical basis for starting the political process that has resulted in the Vienna track.

Moreover, the failure of UN representative Staffan de Mistura's efforts led him to drop his unacceptable political proposals for dealing with the Syrian crisis, such as the policy of partly freezing military operations, and the attempt to see beyond the facts of the conflict and its causes by working to unify the efforts of the regime and the opposition factions to take on extremist groups. Instead, he has been pushed towards a broader approach based on the search for an entrée to a ceasefire, leading to a comprehensive political process leading to a transitional period with regional and international approval, as well as the participation of the regional players influential in Syria. The common objectives shared by Moscow and Washington as represented by the fight against ISIL, encouraged joint efforts to lay the ground for the expanded Vienna meeting, which brought together all the influential parties and launched a minimalist political process. These efforts, however, with their focus on common ground, have delayed dealing with the key areas of disagreement, which could still potentially unsettle the remaining pillars of the political process. A main point of contention is the future of Bashar Assad, questions of his participation in any future elections; his position during the transitional period; what authority he would have; his relationship with the army and security forces; and a slew of detailed minutiae. The classification of terrorist groups will be another major area of disagreement given Russian and Iranian efforts to place opposition groups on the list in the face of suspicious American silence.

## The Position and Options of the Syrian Opposition

The armed Syrian opposition, having absorbed the shock of Russian military intervention and survived Russian airstrikes, today faces the challenge of Russian-American agreement to get over the “Assad Complex” and the push towards a solution the outlines of which remain hazy. All of this is taking place in the context of ongoing efforts led by Russia to change the balance of forces on the ground by exploiting the worldwide mobilization against terrorism, particularly after ISIL operations have united the world against it. The armed Syrian opposition finds itself in a fierce confrontation to stop all the attempts to advance on the ground being made by a variety of players, including the Syrian regime and its barrel bombs; the Russian air strikes; and Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi militia. The political battle to come, however, seems likely to be fiercer still, since the opposition (and the regime) have been excluded from the Vienna process. Their role in negotiations has been restricted to the implementation mechanisms of the solution and they are not involved in its foundations or principles. This situation means all the Islamist opposition factions are facing the prospect of being classified as terrorist groups if they reject the path agreed upon by Russia and the United States.

The situation becomes more complicated with the invitation of opposing factions within the Syrian opposition to the Riyadh conference which is due to be held in December, 2015. These negotiations could become no more than talks between these forces. The creation of a unified opposition delegation is a hard task, but it seems simple in comparison to negotiations that lack clear foundations or established limits, and with a regime that has grown more stubborn since Russian intervention, can maneuver between Moscow and Tehran, and does not seem willing to make concessions. For these reasons, it is unlikely that efforts in Riyadh will focus on forming a delegation, but on forming a strong structure for the opposition, including a representative council (a quasi-parliament) including the various forces; a liberation army made up of all the factions; and an elected executive committee to appoint a negotiating team in its name. In that way, the negotiating team would be derived from a unified political structure committed to the signed opposition charters, including the Cairo document. If this does not occur, the negotiating team taking shape will become a discordant collection of voices. There is room for an alternative Syrian parliament that brings together all of the opposition forces , but there must be a unified political leadership committed to a political program to supervise the negotiating team and principally tasked with leading

and representing the Syrian people and its armed forces. A delegation comprising dictatorship group of forces with incontrovertible differences cannot negotiate with a dictatorship, while the Syrian opposition cannot keep working in its current organizational form in light of the possible failure of the talks.

Accordingly, the Syrian opposition finds itself facing a major test today. Either it can push to harmonize its efforts and coordinate fully before entering the political process as a coherent unit, and so bring about a complete change in its discourse and behavior, end the competition and division between its political and military wings, and disprove the regime's contention that there is no partner for the political process. Alternatively, it faces the prospect of its constituent factions that object to the political process being designated as terrorists by the parties negotiating in Vienna. On this basis, the Riyadh conference will provide an opportunity for the factions within the Syrian opposition to regiment themselves, and to avoid the possibility of international negotiators dictating the composition and nature of the Syrian opposition delegation to the Vienna talks. This is made more urgent given information about who various international powers would prefer to represent the Syrian opposition has been disclosed, further affronting the dignity of the Syrian people and in disregard to their sacrifices. The Riyadh conference could also provide a way to improve the conditions of the opposition, particularly as the Vienna understandings are still not definitive and final, and there is a margin to improve the political, negotiating, and even military position of the opposition. Given that the conference is backed by international approval—over the protests of Iran—it also cements the role of the international powers in support of the revolution, and frees them of having to respond to unilateral conditions placed by the regime's backers. It is impossible to reach a solution that does not take into account the interests of the Syrian opposition and the states backing the Syrian opposition.

## Conclusion

The Vienna declarations, and particularly the latter declaration, represent a new phase in the Syrian crisis and may lead to the onset of a political process. Yet the ability of influential regional and international powers to derail the process exists, since the fate of Assad remains a point of heated contention, as are his role in the transition, and the means by which to deal with terrorist groups. In addition, the parties to the Vienna negotiations continue to disagree over the nature of the outcomes which they expect, in particular on the mechanisms through which they would monitor a ceasefire. This last issue is highly complex given the presence of a large number of factions on the ground

and the difficulty of identifying the demarcation lines across which competing forces are battling, making it impossible to identify the party responsible for violating a ceasefire. Nevertheless, given that the Vienna track is the only pathway in the political arena today for resolving the Syrian issue, it is expected that the coming period will see an intensification of diplomatic action in search of opportunities to strengthen and support the Vienna statement. In all cases, and irrespective of the prospects for the success of the Vienna negotiations, the Syrian opposition must establish unified political and military institutions, a parliament, and an executive.