



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Vienna Talks: Political and Military Pathways in Syria are Inseparable

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Nov 2015

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Introduction

A mere three weeks after Russia's military intervention Syria's political track, moribund since the failure of the Geneva 2 Conference early in 2014, has been reactivated. The US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – the main actors in today's Syria crisis — all came together for the first time in the Austrian capital of Vienna on October 23, 2015 in a process that is set to continue in meetings scheduled for mid-November. While the parties to the first meeting failed to reach an agreement on some of the most intractable issues –the most important of which is the fate of the head of the Syrian regime Bashar al-Assad—the effort concluded with an agreement to hold another, expanded meeting in Vienna on October 30, 2015. This second meeting brought together all of the states that were active or involved in the Syrian question, notably including Iran, and concluded with the issuance of a nine-point statement. For some, this was an important development toward the emergence of an international and regional consensus over the basis for a political solution. For others, it was a worthless endeavor because it did not specify the future of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and deferred this question until the third –and upcoming – meeting.

Activating the Political Track

Military action in Syria increased with the start of Russia's military intervention, and has led to growing fears that the Syrian question could transform into a regional and international battle of wills. Given the multiple state and non-state actors and militias involved, the concern is that this battle – more militarized than ever—could spin out of control. Russian air support for the Syrian regime in conjunction with the Iran-organized and directed militias fighting alongside Assad's forces are being countered by increased military support to opposition forces on the ground. This increase in support meant that Russia's plans to recapture strategic positions on fronts in the northwest of the country and around the capital Damascus fell through. There is strong evidence that, with US and other state support, the Syrian opposition will be able to disrupt Moscow's efforts to impose new realities on the ground; the battles in Rif Hama, which broke out only a week into Russia's military intervention, and the wide-scale use of US-made TOW anti-tank missiles, are just two examples. Instead of creating new realities on which to base a political solution, the effect of the Russian intervention has been reduced to its original goal of simply preventing regime collapse.

While this gives hope for the ultimate success of a political process, there remain legitimate fears over unintended casualties given the number of states with air forces flying in Syrian airspace under the pretext of taking on the Islamic State group (ISIL). The presence of these forces has increased the potential for escalation, and already there have been worrying incidents: Turkey's shooting down of a drone (believed to be Russian) near its border with Syria, and Russian jets more than once violating Turkish airspace. These dangers further increase the need for a re-opening of Syria's political track, one that would give all sides the opportunity to contain any potential escalation.

Russia has its own reasons to support a political solution given current events. Moscow fears being drawn into a war of attrition with no clear end, and at the same time Russian President Vladimir Putin has started making clear just how much influence he has over the Syrian question. Putin's summoning of Assad to Moscow to hear the Russian president's thinking on a settlement a few days before the four-party meeting in Vienna may indicate the peak of Russian influence and spur an agreement securing current Russian interests. With the military avenue already explored, and the danger of escalation for all sides, it seems an apt moment to return to the political track.

Lessons from Vienna

During the second Vienna meeting the impact of changes to the political and military geography in Syria became clear. These may be summarized as follows:

- Given that no Syrian party attended the Vienna meetings, whether from the regime or the opposition, it is clear that the solution is no longer in the hands of the Syrians. Instead, Syria's political track has become a regional and international matter. The failure to find a solution would thus be the result of a failure to reach an agreement between the two axes taking shape at the Vienna meetings. The first axis comprises Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, and insists that the Geneva 1 framework is the only basis for a solution and a "fair" settlement. For this axis, the only answer is a process leading to the formation of a transitional body or administration that excludes Assad from the political scene and from Syria's future, and begins the task of reconstruction. The second axis consists of Russia and Iran. They propose a ceasefire and negotiations leading to the formation of a government made up of regime and opposition figures that will collectively oversee parliamentary and

presidential elections with assurances that Assad will be a candidate. However, any elections involving Assad while he controls the security forces and restricted to the areas held by the regime will be little different to those of the past.

- During the Vienna 2 meeting, the United States assumed the role of “mediator” between the two axes described above. Instead of pushing the country’s stated position on Syria, Washington officials kept out of debates and did not apply pressure on Russia or work to persuade it to show flexibility over areas of disagreement. In the same vein, the US went along with the majority of Arab states taking part, since it expects that any resolution will be reached by negotiations between these two sides, irrespective of the final nature and form of the settlement.
- Despite the unique setup of the Vienna meetings, allies of Syria’s opposition forces were able to obtain a significant concession in Vienna. This is evidenced in the final nine-point statement, signed by representatives of seventeen states, which includes the provision for elections “under UN supervision” and with all Syrians, both inside and outside the country, having the right to participate. This provision worried the regime after its main allies – Russia, Iran, and China – agreed to the stipulation and signed the statement. Should elections take place, the votes of the vast majority of Syrians located outside the country will help to tip the scales in favor of the opposition. Most estimates indicate that half the Syrian population is living in regions controlled by the regime, while the other half is living in opposition areas or in countries where they have taken refuge.
- The Vienna meeting revealed a Europe (France, UK, Germany) critical of Russian military intervention, in particular when compared with the American position, which European states tend to follow. This is due to a European conviction that Moscow’s sorties in Syria are not targeting ISIL

and instead are helping to prolong the conflict and propel new waves of Syrian refugees to Europe. In this context, the latest UN reports indicate that Russian strikes have displaced more than 120,000 Syrians (mostly from Rif Aleppo, or the areas surrounding the northwestern Syrian city) from their homes to the Syrian-Turkish border. Many of these new refugees are waiting for the crossings with Turkey to open so they can move on and settle in Europe.¹

Returning to Vienna via Aleppo

In parallel with the political track in Vienna, Assad's allies have continued to work to strengthen the regime's negotiating positions prior to the resumption of talks. This has primarily been done through escalating military actions in the countryside around Aleppo (Rif Aleppo). The increase in the number of Iranian officers and Revolutionary Guards fighting in the southern Rif Aleppo is an indication of the intensity and ferocity of the battles. Tehran and Moscow are pushing to achieve a decisive military victory in the Aleppo governorate at any price so as to take advantage of the new situation on the ground and impose their vision of a solution in Vienna. Notably, the ISIL offensive in southern Rif Aleppo against Syrian opposition forces coincided with the Russian-Iranian offensive itself.

When the states opposed to the Russian-Iranian axis woke up to the aims of the military campaign in Aleppo they started giving major support to opposition brigades, which enabled them to halt the attacking forces at Khan Tuman and recapture a number of villages in southern Rif Aleppo. The Turkish air force—for the first time—provided air cover in northern Rif Aleppo for some factions, such as the al-Sham Army, the Nureddine al-Zinki movement, and the Sultan Murad Brigades, to repel ISIL assaults and recapture some strategic sites recently taken by ISIL. The AKP's major victory in Turkey's recent parliamentary elections gave opposition units in Idlib and northern Rif Hama a morale boost and political momentum to launch a counterattack that has already inflicted heavy losses on regime forces and forced them to withdraw from many locations they had taken in October under the advantage of heavy Russian firepower from air and sea.

¹ "120,000 Syrians displaced after the Russian intervention," *Al Jazeera Net*, October 26, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1iEEMok>.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties permeating the negotiations, the Vienna track could represent a serious and credible framework for solving the Syria crisis, a solution that would be formed from both an international and regional consensus. The Iranian-Russian axis is struggling to achieve significant results on the ground more than a month after the start of Russian bombing operations and after Iran's dispatch of large numbers of Revolutionary Guard forces to take part in the fighting, especially in Aleppo. However, the opposition's main state backers are facing challenges because of Russia and Iran's attempts to boost fighting forces and change the situation on the ground to pre-empt the potential settlement. Washington's "neutrality" and its inclination to accept any position in line with its policies on Syria and the war against ISIL may, however, give Russia and Iran a wider margin for maneuvering during the coming rounds of talks. To prevent negotiations from becoming a political cover for the continuation of Russian and Iranian military operations in Syria, there must be agreement over essential priority points, at least sparing civilians from bombardment while talks are underway.