

Sochi talks already a non-starter



Precarious phase. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) and his Syrian counterpart Walid Muallim (L) attend talks at the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, last October. (AP)

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The National Dialogue Conference scheduled for November 18 in Sochi, Russia, might be postponed due to a surprisingly high number of early apologies from ranking members of the Syrian opposition.

The two-day congress was the brainchild of Russian President Vladimir Putin and seen by many as a soft alternative to the UN-mandated Geneva process, which the Kremlin was never too enthusiastic about.

Putin started toying with the idea of a Russian-made conference in early October, hoping to bring 1,300 Syrian delegates to his favourite resort on the Red Sea, where they would discuss a settlement tailor-made to his liking. Three back-to-back Sochi talks would follow, giving political substance to the technical Astana talks started by Russia, Iran and Turkey in May. It seemed like a perfect and spectacular show for the Russian president – a golden opportunity to tell the world: “I am in charge of Syria now and I hammer out endgames fit to my liking.”

Charter flights were being prepared to fly the government delegation with parliamentarians and

cabinet ministers to Moscow and then to Sochi and back, escorted by heavy media attendance.

Somewhere along the way, something went wrong. At least two heavyweight groups in the Syrian opposition have rejected the conference: The Riyadh-backed High Negotiations Committee and the Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition. With no regional support, Sochi will fail or fizzle out like all similar Syria peace initiatives since 2011.

Not a single Islamic party was invited to the Sochi talks, certainly not the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, leaving the participation looking increasingly disconnected from what the Syrian street looks like.

The Russian Foreign Ministry published a list of 33 political entities that received invitations for Sochi, 18 of them being groups from inside Syria. Only the Ba’ath Party and its two allies, the Syrian Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, have a real power base. Other parties on the invitee list were either regime-created or regime-friendly, making the conference, armed opposition commander Mohammad Alloush said, “dialogue between the regime and the regime.”

Other influential players expected to attend the conference were the home-grown National Coordination Committees and a handful of Kurd-

ish groups that control of all Kurdish territory east of the Euphrates River.

For now, the decision in Moscow is to put off the conference, rather than call it off altogether, waiting until after the opposition has its second convention in Riyadh on November 15 and after the next round of Geneva talks kick off on November 28. Russian diplomats are working around the clock to convince boycotting parties to attend, promising that this convention will be different from everything else but this does not seem to be working because neither Syrian players nor their regional backers are convinced.

A breakthrough might happen if Putin meets with US President Donald Trump in Vietnam on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference. The last time the two leaders met was in July, when they agreed on a de-conflict zone for southern Syria, manned by 1,000 Russian military police, aimed at freeing both the Syrian-Israeli and Syrian-Jordanian

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borders from Hezbollah influence. They might agree again on something big this time but if they don’t then Sochi is off – at least for now.

Moscow is under increasing pressure from the United States to come up with a sustainable and credible political process in Syria now that its war on terror is coming to an end. The Trump administration does not really care what that endgame entails if it includes eradication of the Islamic State (ISIS), empowerment of Syrian Kurds and clipping the wings of Iran.

Russian officials have presented their Syrian allies with a two-page document outlining their vision for Sochi – a process that leads to “political reform” rather than using the word “transition.” Syrian negotiators would need to agree on creating a constitutional assembly to discard, amend or adopt the Russian-proposed charter and to hold presidential and parliamentary elections, under UN supervision.

Damascus nodded to parliamentary elections while Moscow stressed presidential ones as well that are free and open with no restrictions on Syrian President Bashar Assad’s ability to seek re-election – something, of course, that Saudi Arabia will not approve and that, seemingly, Putin was unable to talk Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud into when the two leaders met in Moscow in October.

Although neither Iran nor Tur-

Putin and Trump commit to political solution in Syria

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US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to continue fighting the Islamic State (ISIS) while a political solution to Syria’s war was sought.

The pair met on three brief occasions during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam.

“We agreed very quickly,” Trump said on Air Force One after the summit, on November 11. “It’s going to save tremendous numbers of lives.”

“We seem to have a very good feeling for each other and a good relationship considering we don’t know each other well,” Trump said.

A formal statement released by the Kremlin confirmed that Putin and Trump “agreed that the conflict in Syria has no military solution.” It also spoke of their “determination” to defeat ISIS and called on all parties to participate in the Geneva peace process.

Russia’s Interfax news agency reported that both leaders committed to maintaining existing Russian-US military channels of communication to avoid “serious incidents involving the forces of partners combating ISIS.”

The formal bilateral meeting that had been expected to take place between Putin and Trump during the summit had not occurred due to scheduling differences, Putin later said.

key has opposed the Sochi talks, neither has embraced them either. Nor have the United States, France or Great Britain and certainly not Saudi Arabia or the United Nations. All seem to believe they are slowly being squeezed out of the political process, taking the role of advisers to Putin rather than stakeholders. At best, they are being given a share of the territorial spoils but always to share with Moscow, never to reign alone. None of them are happy with that.

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ISIS’s last stronghold falls, crucial role played by pro-Iran forces

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Tunis

With the capture of the border town of Abu Kamal, the Syrian regime and its international backers look to have taken the last redoubt in Syria of the Islamic State (ISIS). But the distant threat of further conflict with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey looms.

The seizure of ISIS’s final Syrian stronghold came as more of a whimper than a bang, with the UK-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights reporting that regime militias established a corridor out of the town for jihadists to retreat into the empty lands of Deir ez-Zor governorate and the waiting SDF.

“The last stronghold of Daesh (ISIS), Abu Kamal, is free of the Daesh organisation,” an unidentified commander in the regime’s military alliance was quoted by Reuters as saying, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

Hezbollah, he continued, had proven itself “the foundation in the battle of Abu Kamal.” He said hundreds of the elite forces of the Iran-backed Shia group took part in the battle.

With ISIS hobbled, there are signs that the Damascus regime is shifting its attention to Turkish positions in northern Syria, as well as the precarious fate of the US-backed Kurds.

Speaking to Lebanese TV channel, al-Mayadeen, senior adviser to the Assad regime Bouthaina Shaaban characterised US and Turkish forces within Syria as “illegal invaders.”

“Turkey today is a coloniser country, its forces on our soil are illegal, just as the American forces are on our soil illegally,” she said. “We will deal with this issue as we deal with any illegal invader force on our lands.”

However, after seven years of warfare, few are confident the regime is preparing itself for conflict with a major power.

“No one’s looking to start a fight right now,” RAND Corporation political analyst Ben Connable said in a telephone interview. “However,

anything could happen. You’ve got a pretty toxic mix of people there and let’s not forget other jihadist groups within the disputed areas, such as Ahrar al-Sham... Anyone who predicts what might happen in the next three weeks really is taking a chance.”

Precisely how many Turkish and US troops are present within Syria is unclear.

A convoy of Turkish armoured vehicles entered Idlib province in northern Syria in early October, ostensibly to police the de-escalation zone agreed there by Turkey, Russia and Iran.

The United States first officially deployed troops in support of Kurdish forces in Syria in 2016. The Trump administration has admitted to 503 soldiers being in the country but the Washington Post reported in

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late October that a US general said there could be as many as 4,000 US service personnel supporting the Kurdish-dominated SDF. Either way, any confrontation between the forces stands to be significant.

Other than the regime and its allies, the SDF has proven itself the only force within Syria capable of checking ISIS’s ambitions, seizing the jihadist group’s self-declared capital of Raqqa in October. At the time, the SDF was keen to talk of the city as falling within a potential Kurdish homeland, a possibility hinted at by the Syrian foreign minister in September.

However, with the war’s impetus shifting away from the Kurds and their American allies in favour of the regime, notions of a Kurdish homeland within a federal Syria look less likely.

“Everything is up to the Syrians and to discussions between Syrians and there cannot be a discussion on the division or cutting up of a part of the country or on so-called federalism,” Shaaban said to al-Mayadeen.

Pointing to the Kurdish region of Kirkuk in Iraqi Kurdistan, which was

swiftly reclaimed by Baghdad with the tacit support of Iran and Turkey after a Kurdish independence referendum, Shaaban said its fate “should be a lesson.”

While Kirkuk does serve as an analogy for Kurdish ambitions within Syria, its application is limited.

“In Iraq, you really have a strong central state that can do that (take and hold Kirkuk),” Connable said. “In Syria, we’re a long way off that. You’ve also got to consider just the sheer exhaustion of the participants. It’s really not clear if they’re ready for a fresh fight.”

With the Assad regime emboldened, there are few certainties in Syria and assumptions by Ankara, Washington and the Kurds of the Rojava seem far less certain.

Elsewhere, as Saudi Arabia carves out a new course for itself across the region, what ground it and its proxies might be willing to cede to Iran and its allies in Syria remains a matter of conjecture.

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