

# US and Iran at loggerheads over Syria conference

By Keith Jones  
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Iran has rejected Washington's preconditions for its participation in international deliberations on a "political solution" to the war in Syria—the so-called Geneva Two conference.

The Obama administration, which excluded Iran from the first Geneva conference on Syria, has demanded that Iran sign on to its efforts to coerce the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad into a "power-sharing" agreement with the Islamist-dominated, US-sponsored and -armed "rebels" as the price for admission to Geneva Two.

Iran, Syria's closest regional ally, has repeatedly signaled its readiness to work with other Middle Eastern states and the great powers to end the conflict in Syria. In advocating for such a role, Tehran has cited its participation in the December 2001 Bonn conference on Afghanistan, which ratified a US-organized government headed by Hamid Karzai to replace the toppled Taliban regime with which Iran had almost gone to war in 1998.

Furthermore, as part of its recent attempt to affect a rapprochement with the US, Tehran has signaled that, in exchange for the lifting of the punishing economic sanctions the US and its European allies have imposed on Iran, it would be ready to help Washington stabilize states and governments across the region, including in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But for Tehran to accept Washington's demand that it endorse the communiqué issued by the June 2012 Geneva conference—a communiqué the US has spun as meaning that Assad must relinquish power to a "transitional government" "acceptable" to its rebel proxies—would mean throwing their Syrian allies to their wolves.

Speaking Monday, US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said, "If—and this is an *if*

—Iran were to endorse and embrace the Geneva Communiqué publicly, we would view the possibility of their participation (in Geneva Two) more openly."

Iran was quick to respond. Iran's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Marzieh Afkham said Tehran would not agree to any preconditions to its attendance at the Geneva conference.

"If our participation is in the interests of achieving a solution," declared Afkham, "then it is not acceptable to impose conditions to inviting the Islamic Republic. We will not accept such conditions."

Russia, another close ally of the Assad regime, has repeatedly voiced support for Iran's participation in Geneva Two. And, in a shift, the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, recently spoke in favor of an invitation being extended to Tehran.

On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Moscow and Washington had agreed that the Geneva Two conference should be held in mid-November. He made the statement after meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Forum meeting in Bali, Indonesia.

It is far from certain however that the conference will be held in November or, for that matter ever. Earlier this week, the United Nations envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, conceded the mid-November date was in jeopardy.

A senior leader of the US-sponsored Syrian National Council (SNC), Kamal Al-Labawani, told the London-based daily *Asharq Al-Awsat* earlier this month that while the SNC had previously said it would participate, it is now "of the view that it is not possible for the Geneva Two conference to be held."

The evident reason for this shift is the dramatic

reversals the “rebels” have suffered in recent months and this despite logistical support from the CIA and arms and money from Washington’s regional allies, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

Syrian government forces have been bolstered by volunteers from Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, as well as fighters from the Iranian-supported Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah.

But the principal reason for the reversals suffered by the US-sponsored rebels is their narrow base of support. The vast majority of Syrians are hostile to their ultra-reactionary Islamist program and this opposition has increased in response to the sectarian atrocities they have committed in areas under their control.

Whatever the ultimate fate of the Geneva Two conference, the US’s attitude toward Tehran’s participation is significant. It underscores the duplicitous and ravenous character of the Obama administration’s reputed “diplomatic opening” to Tehran.

For three decades the US has waged an unrelenting campaign of bullying and threats against Iran’s bourgeois nationalist regime, with the aim of ultimately re-imposing on the Iranian people the type of neo-colonial subjugation that existed under the bloody dictatorship of the Shah.

Under the Obama administration this campaign has reached unprecedented intensity, with the US using fraudulent and unproven claims concerning Iran’s nuclear energy program to justify mounting economic war on Tehran and preparations for military action. Washington has imposed sanctions aimed at throttling Iran’s economy by stopping its export trade, including the oil exports that are the main source of foreign exchange and government revenues, and by denying it access to the world financial system. And it has repeatedly threatened Iran with war, including making public that the Pentagon has made elaborate plans for a “shock and awe” air and naval war on Iran.

The war in Syria—which the US came to the brink of intervening directly in only a month ago—has moreover been largely directed against Iran. “Regime change” in Damascus would deprive Iran of its closest regional ally and of ready means of resupplying its Hezbollah allies.

The US’s basic objectives remain the same—to assert

unbridled dominance over the world’s most important oil-exporting region. But facing massive domestic and international opposition to its plans to attack Syria and responding to overtures from Iran’s bourgeois regime, which fears Iran’s economic crisis will lead to working-class unrest, it decided to change tactics.

In pursuing negotiations with Tehran—negotiations that Obama with his “no options are off the table” mantra has emphasized are backed by the threat of war—Washington aims to pressure Tehran to make massive concessions, probe and leverage the cleavages within Iran’s ruling elite, and manipulate domestic US opinion with a view to legitimizing possible future military action.

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