

Plans for Geneva II talks on Syria in disarray

By Chris Marsden
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Efforts to convene the Geneva II peace conference on Syria have only served to demonstrate how the entire Middle East has been destabilised by the actions of Washington.

The aftermath of the Obama administrations forced retreat from direct military intervention to depose Bashar al-Assad and its shift to negotiations with Iran has angered key allies Israel and Saudi Arabia, and set in motion a dramatic foreign policy realignment in Turkey.

A proposed November 23-24 date for the Geneva conference was first announced by the head of the Arab League, Nabil Elaraby on the very day a truck bomb was blown up in a suicide attack by the Al Qaida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra in Hama. Things have only deteriorated since then, with talk now only of a “hope” that Geneva II will convene sometime before next year.

The most dramatic expression of anger by the regional powers with the US policy shift was the October 30 Israeli air strike on Syrian targets near the port city of Latakia, reportedly to destroy Russian-made SA-125 missiles bound for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Washington understood that Israel’s move was aimed against its efforts to engage Damascus, Tehran and Moscow. It took the unusual decision to publicly label Israel as the attacker, prompting angry retorts.

Israel’s media said the US statement caused “senior officials in Jerusalem to tear out their hair.” In *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Alex Fishman wrote: “This is now dangerous and contemptible behaviour committed deliberately by the administration, with the aim of sabotaging Israeli defence policy.”

Saudi Arabia has played a key role in arming the Syrian opposition, so as to put itself at the head of an alliance of Sunni states against Shia Iran.

US Secretary of State John Kerry was forced to make a direct appeal to Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan on October 22, telling reporters, “We know that the Saudis were obviously disappointed that the [Syria] strike didn’t take place.”

Bandar had threatened that Saudi would be making a

“major shift” in relations with Washington. In a high profile diplomatic snub last month, Riyadh turned down a US-backed offer of a seat on the United Nations Security Council. A statement cited the “Security Council’s inability to carry out its duties and responsibility” in Syria and it having not imposed effective supervision on the Iranian nuclear programme.

Saudi has stated its intention to do more to arm Sunni opposition groups in Syria, with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal describing US diplomatic efforts as allowing the Syrian government more time “to impose more killing and to torture its people.”

Turkey, like Saudi Arabia, was publicly opposed to the US retreat from military action against Syria. It has responded, however, by signalling a softening of its differences over Syria with Iran.

On November 1, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan stressed that he still believes that Assad must go, but he and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu issued supportive statements to Zarif’s warning that sectarian conflict in Syria threatened to spill over onto “the streets of London, New York, Rome and Madrid.”

Davutoglu replied, “You can be sure we will be working together to fight these types of scenarios, which aim to see a sectarian conflict.”

Turkey is concerned not only with the threat posed by Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups, but the strengthening of Kurdish separatist movements that have secured control of north-east Syria, which borders Turkey and the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq.

Late October, Kurdish separatist forces threatened to re-enter Turkey from northern Iraq if Ankara did not resuscitate a peace process that led to a ceasefire and Kurdish troop withdrawal in March. Cemil Bayik, a leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), accused Turkey of waging a proxy war against Kurds in Syria by backing Islamist rebels.

“The process has come to an end,” he said. “Either they

accept deep and meaningful negotiations with the Kurdish movement, or there will be a civil war in Turkey.”

Turkey has begun the construction of a wall protecting part of its border with Syria, prompting protests by Kurds in south-eastern Turkey.

Following talks with Zarif, a government source said, “For Geneva 2 to be meaningful, there must be a clear political strategy, and there must be Russia and Iran at the table.”

Speaking to the *Guardian* Sunday, President Abdullah Gul warned that Turkey faced extreme instability and dislocation along its 565-mile border with Syria, as well as the radicalisation of its Kurdish, Alevi and Sunni Muslim populations. Asked about the risk of the civil war spreading beyond Syria, Gul said that if Turkey was attacked or Turkish territory invaded his government would respond militarily “in the strongest way possible.”

The US also has major problems securing the collaboration of the Syrian opposition. After an October 22 meeting of the 11 members of the Friends of Syria group, Salem al-Meslet, vice president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, insisted, “We want [Assad] removed before the elections.” This was in response to Assad hinting that he may run in the 2014 presidential elections.

“There is no way we can accept Iran,” he added, insisting that Saudi Arabia shared this position.

In reality, Meslet has no basis to speak for a unified opposition on any issue, particularly as a loose coalition of 11 Islamist and jihadi groups, which play the lead role in military fighting in Syria, have denounced attendance as an act of treason.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s special envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, said, “In my personal opinion, Geneva II will not happen if no opposition representatives attend.”

Assad’s government has shown itself willing to attend Geneva, meeting a key deadline in plans to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile by mid-2014 by completing the destruction of equipment used to produce deadly agents. But Assad cannot accept demands that he be excluded from the Geneva talks, or be indifferent to the fate planned for him should they succeed.

On October 29 he sacked his vice premier, Qadri Jamil, of the small secular People’s Will Party that is independent of the Baathists. This was because Jamil had engaged in unauthorised meetings with US ambassador to Syria Robert Stephen Ford after stating earlier in Russia that Assad’s resignation could be considered if the

opposition agreed a negotiated settlement.

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki commented, “Ambassador Ford stressed that we must all work for a political solution on the lines of Geneva, that Assad and the inner circle have lost legitimacy and must go.”

Russia is anxious to keep the prospects of talks open, but clearly exasperated by recent developments. At a meeting with French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in Moscow, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev insisted that it was unrealistic to exclude Assad from talks and that he needed “some kind of proposals on the development of political dialogue in Syria itself, on possible elections, on his personal fate.”

“You have to agree that when he recalls the fate of President Mubarak or Colonel Muammar Gaddafi ... his mood probably doesn’t get any better,” Medvedev said.

Medvedev, then president, had personally ordered Russia not to block the UN Security Council vote that paved the way for NATO intervention in Libya. Russia was forced to evacuate its embassy in Tripoli last month when it came under attack by protesters. He and President Vladimir Putin had vowed not to let the same thing happen again. “I said when I was still president that we could not allow events to develop in such a way in Syria,” he said.

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