

Syrian government, “rebels” meet for talks in Kazakhstan

By Bill Van Auken
25 January 2017

For the first time in six years of the bloody conflict provoked by the US and its allies in pursuit of “regime change” in Syria, representatives of the government of Bashar al-Assad and those of the armed “rebels” backed by Washington met face-to-face this week in Russian and Turkish-brokered talks held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

The US was conspicuous by its absence, declining to send any official delegation and present only in the person of the US ambassador to Kazakhstan, who acted as an observer.

While the talks accomplished little beyond an agreement between Russia, Turkey and Iran to establish mechanisms for monitoring the cease-fire that was declared at the end of last year, the fact of the meeting itself was an expression of the debacle suffered by Washington in its strategy to overturn the Assad regime and of the strategic reversal inflicted upon the “rebels” by the Syrian army, backed by Russia and Iran, in retaking the former Islamist stronghold of east Aleppo.

The face-to-face meeting took place between a Syrian government delegation led by Bashar al-Jaafari, Syria’s ambassador to the United Nations, and a “rebel” contingent headed by Mohammed Alloush, the leader of Jaysh al-Islam, a virulently sectarian Islamist militia backed by Saudi Arabia that even former Secretary of State John Kerry referred to as a terrorist “sub-group.”

Each side denounced the other as “terrorist” and the same question that has stymied previous attempts at peace talks, the future of Syria’s President Assad, emerged early in the talks, with the “rebels” demanding his ouster as a pre-condition for a peace settlement, and the government insisting that his status is not up for discussion.

Both sides accused the other of violating the Russian-Turkish-brokered cease-fire initiated on December 30. Like earlier abortive cessations of

hostilities negotiated between the US and Washington, the agreement does not cover either the Islamic State (ISIS) or the Fateh al-Sham Front, which was formerly known as the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate.

Jaafari insisted that the Syrian army would continue to carry out combat operations in the strategic Barada River Valley to break the grip of Al Qaeda forces over the village of Ain al-Fijah, which is the source of the water supply for the 7 million inhabitants of Damascus. The Islamist militia has cut off water to the city since December 23.

The final statement issued by the meeting was signed by Russia, Iran and Turkey, the sponsors of the talks, but not by either the “rebels” or the Assad government. It commits the three countries to “establish a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the cease-fire, prevent any provocations and determine all modalities of the cease-fire.”

The communique signed by the three countries expressed support for the armed “rebel” groups participating in UN-sponsored peace talks set to take place in Geneva on February 8.

While declaring their commitment to “the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic,” the document omitted the previous definition of Syria as a “secular” state. Ambassador al-Jaafari said that the reference to secularism was taken out at the insistence of both Turkey, which is ruled by an Islamist party but claims itself to be secular, and the armed groups, which virtually all call for the establishment of an Islamic regime.

Despite the absence of an official US delegation, Moscow has expressed optimism that it will reach a rapprochement with Washington over Syria following the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president.

Moscow’s Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev, who led the Russian delegation at the talks,

told reporters Tuesday: “Trump’s recent statements on him prioritizing not only the issues of internal policies, but also fighting terrorism, give hope. We think that the US leadership will take the right decisions towards coordination of efforts on the international level, to coordinate efforts to fight terrorism.”

At the beginning of the week, Russia’s Ministry of Defense claimed that the US military had provided targeting information for a joint US-Russian airstrike against ISIS positions in Syria. The Pentagon, however, vigorously denied any such collaboration. US Air Force Col. John Dorrian, chief spokesman for the US-led coalition in Baghdad, called the claim by Moscow “rubbish.”

Earlier this month Russia did carry out joint airstrikes with Turkey against ISIS in the area around al-Bab, a strategic town in northern Syria that Turkey is determined to capture as part of its military campaign to prevent Syrian Kurdish forces from consolidating a contiguous enclave on Turkey’s border. The unprecedented joint action by Turkey, a NATO member, with Russia underscored the sharp tensions between Ankara and Washington, which has utilized the Syrian Kurdish militia, the YPG, as its main proxy ground force in the campaign against ISIS.

Russia’s hopes for improved relations with Washington appeared to get a boost on Monday when Sean Spicer, Trump’s White House press secretary, answered a reporter’s question on potential US-Russian collaboration in Syria by declaring, “I think if there’s a way that we can combat ISIS with any country, whether it’s Russia or anyone else, and we have a shared national interest in that, sure, we’ll take it.”

At the same time, however, both Trump and his key cabinet appointees, including his recently confirmed defense secretary, Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mattis, have signaled the incoming administration’s intentions to ratchet up tensions with Iran, including through the possible withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal concluded between Tehran and the so-called P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States—plus Germany) last July and the re-imposition of sanctions lifted as part of the deal.

Such a provocative action could lead to Iran resuming its nuclear program and the reigniting of the threat of a far wider war in the region, including possible US-backed airstrikes by Israel, which could draw in Russia as well.

Significantly, the Syrian “rebel” representatives in

Astana voiced their acceptance of Russia’s role as a mediator in the Syrian conflict, but strongly opposed that of Iran. Whether or not this stance was worked out in collaboration with their CIA and Saudi patrons, its apparent aim is to harness the incoming Trump administration’s anti-Iran policy to further their own drive for regime change in Syria.

In a further indication that the incoming administration’s “America First” policy is one not of isolationism, but rather an explosive escalation of global militarism, in his remarks Saturday at the CIA headquarters, Trump reiterated the statement he made during the 2016 presidential campaign that the US should have “taken” Iraq’s oil after the 2003 invasion.

In his rambling address to the assembled CIA functionaries, Trump declared: “The old expression, ‘to the victor belong the spoils’ —you remember. I always used to say, keep the oil. I wasn’t a fan of Iraq. I didn’t want to go into Iraq. But I will tell you, when we were in, we got out wrong. And I always said, in addition to that, keep the oil. Now, I said it for economic reasons. But ...if we kept the oil you probably wouldn’t have ISIS because that’s where they made their money in the first place. So we should have kept the oil. But okay. *Maybe you’ll have another chance* [emphasis added].”

Asked to clarify Trump’s statement, Spicer, the White House press secretary, stated, “We want to be sure our interests are protected. We’re going into a country for a cause. He wants to be sure America is getting something out of it for the commitment and sacrifice it is making.”

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi issued a fairly subdued reaction to Trump’s implicit threat, declaring that “Iraq’s oil is constitutionally the property of the Iraqis,” and claiming he had commitments from the new administration for increased aid.

Whether Trump’s offhand comment about “another chance” for seizing oil was directed at Iraq or is an indication of the threat of new and even bloodier wars of aggression against Iran or even Russia is unclear.

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