

On Moscow 1 by Abdul Hamid Qabbani



Moscow talks took a few months to organise. Now they have concluded, as anticipated, without any breakthrough and even without enough media interest. The failure of this conference can be attributed to the lack of real opposition attending the talks. Early signs of the failure are manifested in Moscow's unsuccessful attempts in achieving crucial objectives for the conference: bringing rivals to the negotiating table.

For example, key actors on the opposition side seeking to overthrow the Assad regime have turned down the invitation including the head and members of the National Opposition Coalition. The rejection came due to the absence of an agenda to discuss political transition. Moreover, Moscow, as a hostess of the talks is not neutral, which has been viewed by many as the main obstacle for reaching an agreement.

Many of the attendants on the 'opposition' side are from Damascus-based National Coordination Committee (NCC). In comparison with the Geneva II the disparity in the level of opposition representation is clear. For instance, figures who attended Geneva II last January on the opposition side included Ahmad al-Jarba: previous president of the Opposition Coalition and Haitham Maleh: veteran Syrian human rights activist and former judge. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mualem and his deputy represented the Syrian regime. In Geneva II the high representation indicated the significance and hope that hanged over the failed talks. However, in these current talks the striking difference is that there was no hope of a positive outcome or interest by any parties.

It can be argued that the reason Moscow has been selective in the invitation list - inviting figures who are tolerated by the Syrian regime – is so it can make negotiations fruitful and result in a deal. Albeit, the NCC has no influence on the dynamics of the current conflict. This means that if a serious deal has been reached with the NCC, it would have resulted in no impact or any dramatic change on the course of the conflict in Syria. In other words, the invited opposition would not be able to implement a cease fire or on a rhetorical level withdraw political cover from any anti-regime fighting groups.

Indeed Assad indicated in his recent interview with Foreign Affairs Magazine the futility of the current talks in Moscow. 'If you want to talk about fruitful dialogue, it's going to be between the government and those rebels,' he said. If the dialogue was not meant to yield any positive result the question arising here is what are the primary objectives for the conveners from holding talks?

The answer lies in the analysis of international politics between Moscow and Washington. Following the rise of Islamic States group (IS) in Syria, the interest of Washington has shifted. Therefore, the US Administration has delegated the Syrian file to Moscow, a strong ally of the Syrian regime. Indeed the US has expressed wishes of success for the Moscow negotiations, nonetheless, it continues its programme of providing military training to Syrian rebels. However, as ironic as it appears to be, there is no contradiction with wishes of success of peace talks and

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providing military training for anti-regime forces. It has been made clear by the US that the trained opposition fighters will have the task of fighting IS.

This suggests that the United States views Syria as part of its more than a decade-old war on terror. Regime change is no longer a priority on its agenda – a position that pleases the Kremlin. On the other hand, Moscow has seized the opportunity to play a greater role in international politics through taking over control and management of the Syrian conflict and reviving its soviet power prestige.

On the surface the aims of the Moscow talks were to find a political solution for the Syrian conflict, which has claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people. However, it has been made clear now that the agenda for Russia is to unite the opposition with the Syrian regime against terror. This particular objective has been achieved in the talks – peace agreement has not. Moscow and Washington both disagree on the notion of regime change and particularly the fate of Assad. However, with the growing perceived threats posed by IS, they seem to be working towards the same objective: putting aside differences to serve greater strategic interests.

IS has indeed changed the priorities of external powers in the Syrian conflict. This shift will further the complexity of the war. The absence of international strategy to resolve the Syrian conflict will exacerbate the complexity of the war. Current approaches will certainly not bring peace to the war-torn country.