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INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC  
STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

# SITUATION ANALYSIS

**Syria negotiations: a way  
out of quagmire?**



UN envoy Stefan De Mistura has been in Geneva for the past week, trying to iron out a deal with both opposition members and the Syrian regime. The highly anticipated talks are a direct result of thorough and tough diplomatic processes, which involved not just the Syrian regime and the opposition, but also their respective backers. At the time of this writing, talks have just been suspended until the 25<sup>th</sup> of February. Yet no hopeful signs exist as to whether actual progress can be made once the official talks can begin. Talking about what these talks will actually achieve may seem premature; but is it?

While the negotiations are taking place, regime forces, backed by Russian airplanes, are running over the highly strategic city of Aleppo. Opposition is clearly on defensive, or at worse in retreat. By examining at the goal of the talks and compare these to the ground reality, we may be able to accurately forecast what the negotiations' end game is and what their aftermaths may look like.

To begin, it is essential to both examine and establish what the international community, i.e. the West and Russia, are hoping to achieve from these talks. Second, it is necessary to investigate how regional backers of the regime and the opposition fit into that narrative.

The Western narrative has squarely focussed on the Islamic State (IS). Very

little discussion has surrounded the possibility of regime change nor finding a resolution to the conflict. However, the West does hope to establish a transitional government and work out a compromise between the opposition forces and the regime. A transitional government, as the thinking goes, could centralise its focus to fight IS, rather than fixating on in-fighting. Thus, a negotiated settlement would lead to a consolidation of strength to support the Syrian transitional government, which could then take on the IS. According to this strategic thinking, the removal of the Assad regime isn't the West's primary focus. However, negotiating a transition would benefit the ultimate aim of destroying IS.

In contrast, the strategic aims of Russia are quite different than those of the West. Due to Russia's close ties with Assad, the focus is to eradicate any opposition to the Assad regime. By ensuring the stability of the regime, Russia is able to secure its highly strategic interests (i.e. its military bases) in the coastal regions. In Russia's view, the Assad regime is the best guarantor for its strategic prize, to which Assad himself is paramount. Hence, Assad is existential to preservation of the regime (i.e. the regime will fall if Assad goes), and therefore Russia does not seek to remove Assad from power. IS is thus far not an immediate concern to Russia, since it does not yet pose an imminent threat to Russia,

whether internally or to its region of interest (i.e. Central Asia).

With the strategic interests of both key players so wide apart, it is no wonder that negotiations are stalling. The Syrian opposition, which is very much divided and currently on retreat militarily, does not have much to dictate. When it comes to diplomacy: power matters.

Recently, one of IISA's delegations was present at a debrief by one of NATO's key ally on the war against IS. And yet, there was no clear answer to the question: "Where is it all going?"

Regional allies to the two power blocks are divided. If western strategic interests are to create a power sharing agreement with the regime and opposition, then it can expect complications with regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and particularly Turkey.

On the other hand, there seems to be some cohesion among Russian, Iranian and Syrian interests. With the military tide in their favour – thanks to Russia's merciless bombing of Aleppo- they are better positioned to dictate terms in Geneva.

Thus, at first glance, it may seem as if De Mistura is merely shuttling between

regime and opposition. Yet, in reality, he must juggle the very divergent global strategic interests of global powers. In such a complex strategic situation, negotiations can only succeed when both sides are exhausted and feel they can go no further. It is precisely why this round of Geneva will likely fail. The Syrian regime, backed by Russia gains no clear strategic advantage of heeding to Western calls to stop the bombing, particularly because they're on a winning streak. De Mistura therefore is ready to continue to engage both sides for at least the next six months or so.

In short, no immediate breakthrough should be expected. Instead, more focus should be directed at what is happening the ground, where the power games is currently being played. And, it is not yet clear how future negotiations will be impacted by the response to Russian gains in the North and South, particularly by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Western allies.

For more discussion on the Syrian crises and the wider geopolitics of the Middle East, stay tuned for our Annual Strategic Paper, part of our Ibn Khaldun series, to be released in March/April.