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US, Russia hold tense talks on Syria

By Bill Van Auken

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Talks held Friday in Vienna between US, Russian, Turkish and Saudi foreign ministers on the Syrian crisis were dominated by the opposed positions of Washington and Moscow on the US demand for the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad.

The discussions came after more than three weeks of Russian air strikes in Syria, which have apparently begun to shift the tide of battle on the ground. Syrian government forces have made advances on several fronts, including in the western province of Latakia and around Syria's second city, Aleppo. They are fighting against a collection of Islamist militias dominated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front, which have received backing from the US and its regional allies.

The meeting was also accompanied by indications that the Obama administration may be preparing an escalation of its own intervention in Syria, in a dangerous bid to counter Russia's growing influence over the conflict.

On the eve of the talks in Vienna, US Secretary of State John Kerry spelled out Washington's continuing insistence on the bringing down of Assad. He said that all of the countries with an interest in Syria, including Iran and Russia, were agreed on the need for a unified, secular and pluralistic government.

“One thing stands in the way of being able to rapidly move to implement that, and it’s a person called Assad- Bashar Assad,” Kerry said. “So the issue is, can we get to a political process during which time the future devolution and allocation of power in Syria is properly allocated by the people of Syria?”

In essence, Kerry is demanding that negotiations secure for Washington what it has been unable to achieve through the proxy war for regime change that it unleashed in Syria four years ago at the cost of over a quarter of a million lives and the displacement of nearly half the country’s population.

Answering the American position Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov condemned the US “fixation” with Assad, insisting that “the fate of the president of Syria must be decided by the Syrian people” and not dictated by outside powers.

The Vienna talks came in the wake of this week’s trip to Moscow by Assad for discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin and other top Russian officials. It was the first time he had left the country since 2011 and was meant to signal Russia’s recognition of his role as the head of the “legitimate government” of Syria.

The US wants Assad deposed and a puppet of Washington put in his place, while keeping the state structure in Syria largely intact. Moscow, on the other hand, is determined to maintain its influence in Syria, with or without Assad in the presidency. This includes the sole Russian military base outside of the former Soviet Union, and Syria’s strategic position in terms of energy pipelines, vital to the interests of the Russian oligarchy. The US and Russian armed forces have been unleashed in Syria for these diametrically opposed purposes, even as both sides claim that they are there to combat “terrorism.”

Nothing of substance was reported to have come out of Friday’s discussions outside of an agreement to hold another meeting as early as next week.

Kerry said that the talks would be followed by a “broader meeting in order to explore whether there is sufficient common ground to advance a meaningful political process.”

Washington’s intransigence has apparently dictated the shape of the discussions thus far. The US has opposed the inclusion of its supposed allies in Europe, who have asked to participate along similar lines as the so-called P5+1 talks that secured the nuclear deal with Iran and included the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States; plus Germany.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius on Wednesday called for a similar arrangement of the Syrian talks, to be “enlarged with regional partners.” Diplomatic sources added that the European position was that Iran should be included in the discussions.

Lavrov on Thursday said that Moscow also wants the talks enlarged “to ensure a maximally effective fight.” He indicated that Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and China should be added to the four countries that met in Vienna. “This quartet is clearly not enough,” Lavrov added.

Kerry and other US officials have signaled their desire to keep the negotiations closed to those “directly involved,” meaning the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have served as the principal supporters of the Islamist militias in Syria, while also carrying out air strikes against ISIS positions in the country, and Russia, which is conducting its own military intervention.

Iran, however, is also directly involved, with Iranian officials Friday announcing a stepping up of military support for the Assad government, which they classified as an advisory mission. Tehran has also announced the deaths of several Iranian commanders and soldiers in Syria.

Kerry flatly rejected Iran’s participation in the Syria talks. “There will come a time perhaps where we will talk to Iran but we are not at the moment at this point of time,” he said.

Summing up the arrogance of US imperialism, he added: “If some country with whom we have differences were to participate in any kind of meeting, then it would be very quick and easy to determine whether the country is there as an obstruction or as a... participant seeking a solution.”

The *New York Times* Friday carried a front page story based on leaks from senior Obama administration officials indicating that Kerry and others are pushing for the US to create no-fly zones in Syria under the pretext of protecting the civilian population.

The proposal was reportedly put forward at a White House meeting on Monday in which Defense Secretary Ashton Carter pushed back with what the newspaper described as “sobering estimates of the extensive military resources required to enforce such zones” as well as a warning of an “inadvertent clash” with the Russian military if US air power is employed to control areas of the country.

The *Times* reported that advocates of the no-fly zone said that they believed the Pentagon had deliberately “inflated” its estimate of the costs of the operation in a bid to kill the proposal.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon this week deployed a dozen A-10 flying gunships to the Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey, from which US warplanes have been carrying out air strikes in Syria.

The slow-flying aircraft, which are equipped with rapid-fire cannon, missiles and other ordinance is utilized to bring devastating power to the close-air support of ground forces. It is the same warplane that was used in the US attack on the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan that massacred 22 patients and medical staff.