

Hopes for Syria Peace Hanging by a Thread

by Jeffrey Steinberg

May 26—The world is entering a decisive week that may very well determine whether the ongoing Syria crisis will be the trigger for global war, or will be resolved through a superpower diplomatic effort that leads to greater cooperation on a whole range of strategic issues.

Both the United States and Russia face significant obstacles to the success of the scheduled June 10-11 Geneva II conference, aimed at reaching a diplomatic solution to the two-year conflict in Syria, which has emerged as a full-scale surrogate war between regional and global powers. Several pre-meetings have recently taken place, ostensibly aimed at settling the composition of the delegations, and the key issues to be taken up at the Geneva meeting.

As of now, the Istanbul gathering of Syrian opposition groups and their regional sponsors is deadlocked. A split within the Friends of Syria rebel camp, pitting Saudi Arabia and the United States against Qatar and France over the issue of who will lead the rebel delegation, has blocked any agreement. The Russian Foreign Ministry announced on May 25 that the Syrian government has formally agreed to participate in the conference, but there is nothing on that subject from the rebels, who, so far, have not even met their objective of choosing a new leadership.

There are also disputes between France and Russia over whether to invite the Iranian government to participate. Russia insists that, as an active party to the conflict, Iran must be included, along with Saudi Arabia,

which has been the largest supplier of money and arms to the rebels, since the outset of the crisis in early 2011. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told reporters, en route to the U.A.E. on May 25, that France would block any participation by Iran.

U.S. and Russia at Odds?

More decisive, however, would be a split between Russia and the U.S. on the conference project, as seems to have occurred at the latest meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, held in Paris May 27-28.

That meeting occurred in the immediate aftermath of a gathering of the European Union foreign ministers May 27, where they declined to renew an arms embargo against sending military hardware to the Syrian rebels. Pushed by the British, the measure allegedly provides for delaying any shipments that individual countries might decide to make until after the upcoming international conference, so as not to sabotage it. Meanwhile, British Foreign Minister William Hague preposterously claimed that the supplying of arms to the rebels will be carried out in accordance with international law. Of course, international, and even EU, law prohibits arming opposition forces to a legitimately elected government.

Following the Lavrov-Kerry meeting in Paris, Kerry reiterated that what is being called Geneva II should go ahead “without any preconditions,” while Lavrov immediately condemned the violation of international law represented by the EU decision.

According to Ria Novosti, Lavrov said, “Discussing at an official level whether or not to supply arms to non-state subjects [i.e., the rebels] is in conflict with all norms of international law, including the principles of non-interference in states’ internal affairs, not to mention military intervention.”

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton confirmed on May 27 that from now on, every EU member country has the right to make its own decision on arms exports to Syria, meaning that EU countries could now supply the Syrian opposition with weapons. She affirmed that any arms sent to Syria would be “intended for the protection of civilians,” and added that the EU governments would review the position on sanctions on Syria before Aug. 1.

But Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said earlier in the day that the EU’s failure to extend the arms embargo on Syria may directly harm the Geneva II conference on Syria.

“This is a reflection of double standards and a direct blow to the international conference on Syria proposed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on May 7,” Ryabkov told journalists, as reported by Ria Novosti.

On-the-Ground Realities

The Geneva II conference represents the last, best possibility of settling the Syria crisis through diplomacy. If the conference fails, according to senior U.S. intelligence officials, the United States will join with France, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey in opening the floodgates of more sophisticated weapons to the Syrian opposition. This, the source emphasized, would shift the military balance on the ground over time—but would mean that the Syrian conflict would almost certainly spill over into a full-scale regional war, that could trigger a global confrontation.

In the meantime, it is fully confirmed by reliable diplomatic and military sources that the U.S. has Special Forces on the ground inside Syria.

Already, Syrian rebel groups, including the radical jihadist al-Nusra Front, have announced plans to launch military operations inside Lebanon, targeting Hezbollah, an ally of the Assad government. On May 26, three rockets hit targets in the southern suburbs of the Lebanese capital Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold.

In recent weeks, the Syrian Army has been making significant advances on the ground, retaking strategic transportation corridors to the Lebanese and Jordanian

borders. The rebel stronghold of Homs is on the verge of falling to government troops, and many military analysts now forecast that the Assad government will survive for the foreseeable future.

The Iran Front

In another clear indication that the regional situation has reached a make-or-break point, 99 members of the U.S. Senate, on May 22, kowtowed before the AIPAC lobby, and passed new sanctions against Iran, which effectively shut the Islamic Republic out of the world energy market, and pose punishing sanctions against any countries or businesses that continue to purchase Iranian oil. The clear intent of the Senate action, sponsored by Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was to sabotage any possibility that Tehran might cooperate with Moscow and Washington in bringing the Syrian debacle to a diplomatic conclusion.

Next month, Iran will hold presidential elections, whose outcome will have a significant impact on the ongoing negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (UN Security Council Permanent Five plus Germany) nations, over Iran’s nuclear program. The Senate actions will strengthen the hands of hardline factions inside the Islamic Republic.

It is clear that both Iran and Syria are targets in the British Empire faction’s drive for global confrontation with Russia, but this faction faces strong opposition from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other war-avoidance groupings within the Washington diplomatic and intelligence institutions. The anti-war grouping continues to oppose U.S. military action in Syria, and to push for U.S.-Russia diplomatic initiatives.

U.S.-Russian relations have been frozen for more than a year over a range of disputes, including the European ABM deployments, which Russia views as a direct threat to the existing mutually-assured-destruction balance of power. In addition to the Geneva II meeting, there are other crucial diplomatic events scheduled for early June, including meetings between President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin, and between Obama and China’s new President Xi Jinping.

The Obama-Xi meeting was announced last week. The two leaders will meet in southern California June 7-8. China has strongly backed Russia’s position that the Syria crisis must be resolved through diplomatic means, and that the use of foreign-backed rebels to overthrow a sovereign government is a violation of international law.