

# With Syria Talks in Disarray, UN Yanks Invitation to Iran

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The United Nations has abruptly rescinded an invitation to Iran to participate in talks organized by the major powers on a political settlement of the three-year-old conflict in Syria.

The plans for the so-called Geneva II negotiations had been thrown into disarray Monday with both Washington and the US-backed exile front, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), issuing ultimatums to the UN to drop its last-minute invitation to Iran to participate.

The controversy, coming just two days before the so-called Geneva II negotiations were set to open in Switzerland, appeared to threaten the cancellation of the so-called peace conference.

The US, Britain and France, together with their so-called “rebel” stooges based in Turkey, have opposed the participation of Iran, which is, together with Russia, the closest ally of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad. The major Western powers see Tehran’s presence as inimical to their main goal in convening the talks, which is to secure through diplomatic pressure what their protracted and bloody proxy war for regime change has been unable to achieve.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who announced the invitation to Iran on Sunday, described himself Monday as “dismayed” by the uproar triggered by the move and said he was reviewing the UN’s options.

The pretext for Washington’s demand that the invitation be dropped is that Iran has not explicitly and publicly signed on to the terms of the so-called Geneva I communique, drafted in June of 2012 at a conference in which no Syrians participated. This document calls for an end to hostilities and the formation of a “transitional governing body” formed by members of the Assad government and the opposition “by mutual consent.”

The Obama administration has interpreted this as a demand for the immediate and unconditional removal of Assad from power, something that is nowhere stated in the communique.

Ban Ki-moon asserted Sunday that Iran had been invited after the country’s foreign minister, Javad Zarif, had agreed to the essential terms of Geneva I. “Foreign Minister Zarif and I agree that the goal of the negotiations is to establish, by mutual consent, a transitional governing body with full executive powers,” Ban said.

The deal would have made Iran one of 30 countries attending the opening of the talks on Wednesday, though it would not be directly involved in the UN-mediated peace talks that were to begin in Geneva on Friday between the Assad regime and the Western-backed opposition front. Among those attending are governments that have been most intimately involved in funneling arms, money and foreign jihadists to the so-called rebels, such as the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

Iranian officials, however, subsequently denied that Tehran had signed on to anything. "As announced before, we do not accept any precondition to take part in Geneva conference II, and based on the official invitation participate in the talks without any precondition," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham said Monday.

Ban Ki-moon seized on these statements Monday afternoon—after the SNC had set a deadline for either the rescinding of the invitation to Iran or its own withdrawal from the talks—saying in a written statement that he was "deeply disappointed" by Iran's failure to embrace the prescriptions set down in the Geneva I document, claiming that Tehran's subsequent statements were "not consistent with the assurances he received."

The UN secretary general also allowed that he was "disappointed" in the SNC's decision to boycott the talks if Iran was not excluded.

"He (Ban) continues to urge Iran to join the global consensus behind the Geneva communique," a UN spokesman said. "Given that it has chosen to remain outside that basic understanding, (Ban) has decided that the one-day Montreux gathering will proceed without Iran's participation."

It was not clear how a dispute between Washington and the UN secretary general, who has generally aligned himself on the policies of US imperialism, came close to derailing the talks.

The UN spokesman said that there was nothing "hasty" about the invitation to Iran, and that Washington had been kept fully informed of the gesture. In the end, however, Ban was compelled to buckle under intense US pressure.

Both Russia and the UN special envoy on Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, had argued in the months preceding the conference that it was crucial for Iran, given its close ties to the Syrian regime and its influence in the region, to be a participant in the talks.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sharply criticized the Western demands to exclude Iran Monday. "Not to ensure that all those who may directly influence the situation are present would, I think, be an unforgivable mistake," he said.

It is possible that Washington discovered that no amount of bribes and threats could compel its clients in the SNC to attend Geneva II if Iran were to attend.

It is far from clear that—with or without Iran—anything of major substance can be achieved through the talks in Switzerland. Having managed by means of their proxy war to kill over 100,000 people and lay waste to an entire society, US imperialism and its allies in the region do not appear to have the means to cobble together any agreement that would halt the bloodshed.

The sharp tensions accompanying the Geneva talks, and the likelihood that they will end in

a shambles, only underscores the continuing danger of a wider war in the region, despite the Obama administration's pivot away from direct military intervention and toward a negotiated settlement with Iran last September.

The SNC, which nearly disintegrated over the vote to participate in the negotiations, does not appear to exert influence among the predominantly Islamist militias on the ground in Syria, which in recent months have spent at least as much time fighting each other as confronting government forces.

"The coalition's ineptitude has cost it the support of most ordinary Syrians as well as a majority of the armed rebel groups, making it unclear who exactly the coalition will represent if it does attend the talks," the *Washington Post* bluntly commented. "Not going would mean losing the support of the coalition's last remaining constituents, however: the Western allies that helped foster the group's creation."

Assad, for his part, has explicitly rejected demands for his resignation and, in an interview with the AFP news agency, said there was a "significant" chance he will run for another term in elections set for April of this year.

The Syrian president stressed that the talks in Switzerland should focus on the "fight against terrorism" and described the proposal to form a joint government with the SNC as nothing more than "a good joke." The US-backed oppositionists, he said, "come to the border for a 30-minute photo opportunity and then they flee. How can they be ministers in the government?"

Kerry warned last Friday that Washington was "not out of options" in pursuing its goal of regime change in Syria if Assad fails to bow to imperialist pressure.

In recent months, US officials have reportedly pursued ties with the Islamic Front, the militias that have broken with the Western-backed Supreme Military Council while confronting the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in armed clashes in northeastern Syria. Obama administration officials have discussed resumption of aid to the "rebels," acknowledging that some of it would wind up in the hands of the Islamic Front.

These plans have been complicated, however, by the public statement of a senior leader in the Front's largest fighting group, Ahrar al Sham, that it, and not the ISIS, is the true representative of Al Qaeda in Syria. In a statement on Twitter, the leader, Abu Khaled al Suri, professed his loyalty to Al Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden, and its current nominal head, Ayman al Zawahiri, while insisting that he had been designated by Al Qaeda to mediate disputes between rival Islamist militias inside Syria.

Meanwhile, the head of the Islamic Front's Military Committee, Zahran Alloush, announced via Twitter that he was asking the group's leadership "to endorse putting the participants of both parties in Geneva II on a wanted list."

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