

Situation Assessment



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Munich Conference

Current Attempts to reach a Diplomatic Solution in Syria

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Current Attempts to reach a Diplomatic Solution in Syria

Synopsis

In the current reading, we try to present the background to the Munich Security Conference the principle aim of which is related to the crisis in Syria. The paper evaluates the conference results and the different parties' stances. Based on the evaluation process, we conclude that executing the agreement will be difficult due to the many gaps in the agreement and the failure of the Conference participants to find an acceptable executable formulation with the potential to succeed. The conference attempted to cover up prior repeated diplomatic failures of the Vienna process. These gaps present a larger opportunity for regional escalation and intervention. In light of the continued Russian bombing of civilians in Syria, there will be an opportunity for Washington to play a larger role in applying pressure on the different parties involved to execute more effective solutions.

Conference Background

The 52nd Munich Conference for Security was convened on Friday the 12th of February 2016 for three days. The conference took place with the dangerous developments in the Syrian crisis since the start of 2016 in the background. Amongst those developments: the increasing Russian bombing in support of the regime, the failure of the political discussions in Geneva, and the willingness of countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily in Syria.

The conference agenda included three main axes:

1. The continued war in Syria.
2. The continuous arrival of refugees to Europe.
3. The future of the European Security System.

The conference's annual report presented cases described as "limitless struggles," using the conflict in Syria as such an example. The report included a presentation of the threats that transcend borders, the most dangerous of which is "Islamic State".

According to the report, there is no solution on the horizon for these crises due to what the report referred to as the negativity of "the incompetent guardians", and the "reckless and destructive" behaviour of some actors. The report referred to Washington's refusal to run the crises, and Europe's failure to build a common foreign policy based on security and its preoccupation with solving the refugee crisis amongst other internal issues.

The report summarizes the Munich Security Conference fully from what was presented before the conference to the expectations it generated, amongst them:

1. 2016 will witness the growth of risks.
2. 2016 will witness military confrontations and radical changes.
3. 2016 will be the start of more instability on the international level¹.

The Purpose of the Conference regarding the Situation in Syria

The Syrian issue was in the limelight in the conference where the participants' principle aim was to reach an immediate ceasefire. Washington called for the immediate ceasefire and Moscow, which has not stopped its airstrikes, also presented a suggestion about the ceasefire. According to many observers following the event, the Russian suggestions came to achieve more gains and enhance the position of the regime.

To achieve this aim, the International Syria Support Group² held a meeting in Munich on the 11th of February 2016, and issued a series of decisions. Amongst the most important:

¹ Michael King, *Munich Security Conference: the end of the Phase of International Stability?* DW, 12 February 2016. <http://dw.com/p/1HsDr>

² A communication group formed of 17 countries that represent the different participants in the civil war. The group is formed of China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States of America.

1. The start of delivering humanitarian aid to besieged areas in Syria in coordination with the United Nations with the availability of a number of guarantees about the issue. The week of the conference humanitarian aid was delivered to Deir ez-Zor, Al-faouat, and Kefraya using air drops. Aid was delivered by land to the besieged areas in Damascus' suburbs: Madaya, Al-mouadamiya, and Kafr Batna.
2. The group will develop a formulation to halt "acts of hostility" in Syria in the week following the meeting. All parties participating in the conflict will be subject to the formulation with the exception of Daesh, Al-nusra Front and any other group listed on the Security Council's terrorist list.
Actions to halt acts of hostility will begin a week after the Munich conference. These actions are expected to come into effect in the week following the 12th of February 2016 after the Syrian government and the opposition conduct the proper consultations in Syria and their agreement to abide by the actions. The ISSG working team will purpose ways to stop the acts of hostility by taking on the following responsibilities:
 - Defining the areas that are under the control of Daesh, Al-nusra Front, and other groups listed on the Security Council's terrorist list.
 - Guaranteeing effective communication between the different parties to ensure representation, and the quick reduction of tension.
 - Solve the claims about lack of representation or responsiveness
 - Calls to disobey the decisions of the International Syria Support Group ministers' decisions, or any behavior called for by the ministers' decisions that go against the aim of halting acts of hostility; including dismissing those parties from the arrangements to end the hostilities, and the protection that it grants them.

In addition to many other points amongst them:

3. While the ceasefire process would facilitate delivering humanitarian aid, it is not a prior condition for the aid to reach any area in Syria.
4. All ISSG members agreed they would exercise all their efforts to maintain the halting of acts hostility, deliver humanitarian aid, take the necessary

measures to ensure no prohibited activities take place, based on the Security Council decisions number 2170, 2178, 2199, 2249, 2253, 2254.

5. Committee to immediately facilitate the complete execution of the Security Council decision 2254 that was unanimously taken on the 18th of December 2015³. Including the points about the Syrian political transition and power based on the Geneva declaration, the ultimate necessity for all parties to participate in the negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations with representation and speed. The ISSG members also pledged to dedicate their efforts to facilitating quick progress regarding the negotiation whereby an agreement is reach in 6 months about a political transitional plan that establishes credibility, inclusiveness and non-sectarian rule. A schedule must be agreed on to put a timeline for the process of writing a new constitution, hosting free and honest elections based on the new constitution 18 months after the rewriting of the constitution. During this period the country will be run under the supervision of the United Nations based on the highest international standards of transparency and accountability with all Syrians, including those dispersed around the world, who are qualified participating. Executing these goals will require the main participants and members in the ISSG to work together coherently according to the political humanitarian, and military dimensions⁴.

³ Statement of the International Syria Support Group, U.S. Department of State, 11 Feb. 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252428.htm>

⁴ *ibid.*,

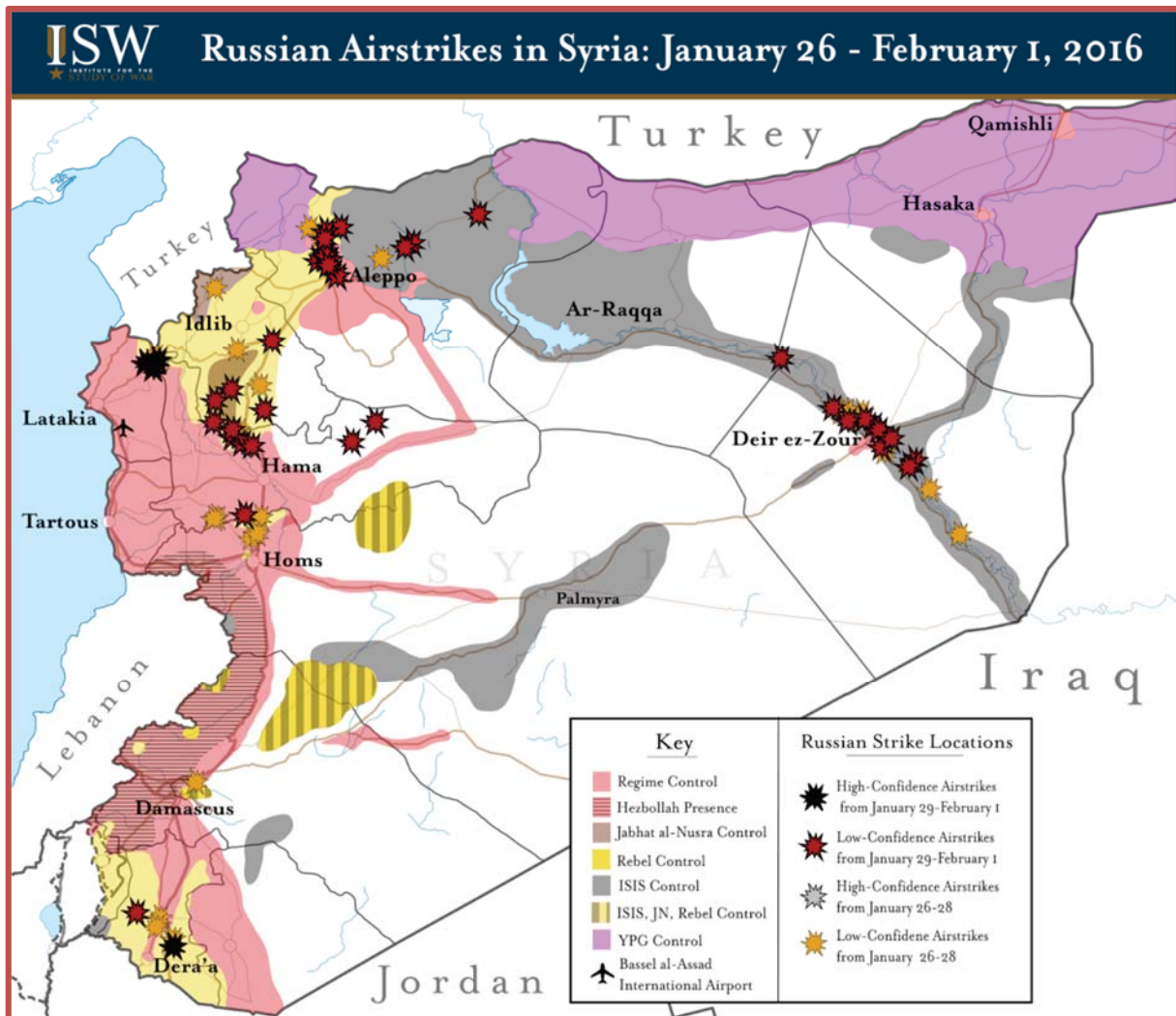
Evaluating the Conference Results

At first glance it does not appear that the conference will change the situation in Syria towards the better. Quite the opposite, from looking at the conference results and according to western diplomats and political analysts it appears: the conference results, disregarding the lack of political depth about the execution of the agreement and observational mechanisms, leaves the Syrian opposition open to the Russian air-force campaign. “This result has several reasons of them: Russia is not a reliable ally in seeking peace in Syria and does not have faith in serious discussions.” Russia places it priority of destroying the Syrian opposition ahead of destroying Daesh. Some people have predicted that Munich’s results are a preliminary plan to divide Syria and not to achieve peace in it.

This plan appears most clearly when looking at the formulation of the “halting acts of hostility” which does not oblige Russia to stop its bombing. Russia confirmed at the start of its intervention in September 2015 that it is fighting terrorism, yet most of its bombing has been directed against the moderate Syrian opposition. The formulation gives Russia authorization to conduct further operations against the opposition under the guise it is targeting Al-nusra Front whose areas of presence intermix with areas under the opposition’s control.

The results did not discuss the terms of action in the event groups categorized as terrorist evacuate the areas under their control and the opposition or other groups take their place.

The following map indicates the distribution of Russian bombing in Syria most of which is directed at the opposition. The map covers the period extending from the 26th of January till the 1st of February 2016 with a focus on Aleppo and Idlib.



There is ambiguity about the humanitarian aspects as the results of the Munich conference did not call for the lifting the blockade on the different besieged cities and villages. The conference results only handled the issue of delivering aid. Regarding the Russian consideration for the humanitarian situation, since the start of its airstrikes

over 4 months ago, Russia has bombed 22 hospitals and 27 schools in areas under the control of the opposition within Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, and Deraa provinces⁵.

Based on the abovementioned it is possible to say: the current formulation of the conference results clearly indicates that it is an attempt to cover up the diplomatic failure in Geneva and an attempt to patch up the situation to get out of the problem.

The Political Stance

The Munich Conference brought to the fore talk of an escalation of the dispute between Russia and the west about Syria. The escalation appeared in some of the declarations such as the declaration of the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev about the presence of “a new cold war between Russia and West,” placing the responsibility for this situation on the west for considering Moscow a source of threat.

In the same context, the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Alliance Stoltenberg accused Russia of ruining efforts to reach a peaceful solution for the conflict in Syria by targeting the opposition groups instead of members of Daesh. He said: “A sustainable peace cannot be achieved without stopping this.”

From another angle we can summarize the American stance in Munich from the American Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Kerry’s declarations as he confirmed several points during the conference:

1. Moscow until this point has targeted the legitimate Syrian opposition in the majority of its airstrikes.
2. He invited Russia to stop its airstrikes against the Syrian opposition, and tied the success of the International Support Syria Group with the halting of the airstrikes.
3. If Russia, the regime, and those supporting it think they are capable of challenging the international community then they have not learnt from the past five years.

⁵ Muhammad Misto, Russia targets 22 hospitals and 27 schools in Syria since the start of its airstrikes. Anadolu <http://goo.gl/4j4WNT>

On the eve of the conference, Kerry said: Washington will use the conference as a final opportunity to find a political solution and a practical test to measure the seriousness of the Russians and Iranians. Otherwise they will be forced to mobilize the plan “B” without paying attention to other details. It appears however that the plan may depend on allowing, at least partially, the Turkish and Saudi military intervention.

Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, criticized Washington’s statements after the meeting of the International Support Syria Group on the basis the statements did not conceive of the possible military cooperation between Russia and the United States with regards to the ceasefire. The Russian minister mentioned that these declarations place the subject of executing the agreements that that group reached.

The Russian and German Ministers of Foreign Affairs disputed over the ceasefire in Syria, as Lavrov said: it is worth 49% while Steinmeier estimated it to be 51%.

Regarding the Saudi military intervention, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov said: The International Support Syria Group meeting in Munich did not discuss the capability of Saudi Arabia conducting an infantry military operation in Syria. The comment came after the declaration of the American Minister of Defence Ashton Carter that he expected the participation of Saudi and Emirati forces in the war against “Daesh”. The Russian Prime Minister Medvedev criticized Saudi Arabia after it expressed its willingness to send its infantry to Syria and said: “No one has the right to threaten to send in land forces.”

Adel Al-jubeir, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, confirmed during the Munich conference that “Daesh” cannot be defeated without removing the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad from power; adding that this aim will be achieved in the end. He said Al-Assad is responsible for the death of 300 thousand persons, and he is a factor that attracts terrorists.

The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, the British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond, the French Minister of Defence Jean-Yves Le Drian, agreed that the success of the ceasefire decision in Syria, which the ISSG agreed on, depends on the degree of commitment of the Syrian regime and Russia. They said that: “Russia must stop its airstrikes on the opposition groups.”

Regarding the Syrian opposition's position, the Higher Council for Negotiation formed from the Syrian opposition welcomed the Munich agreement. It confirmed the opposition's willingness to participate in discussions in Geneva 3, "If the agreement is achieved on the ground." The positivity of their approach is based on the ceasefire in Syria being linked with the political transition. The opposition also confirmed it will not agree on any proposed truce unless the leaders of the armed factions in Syria agree.

Conclusion and Forecast

Despite western state actors' verbal escalation against Russia, the conference results and its slogans allow Russia to execute its current policies with international coverage. Whether its continued airstrikes or its mysterious policies regarding humanitarian affairs without specifying the full details attached to it. The results clarify that the Munich conference is a continuation of the failure that happened at the Geneva talks last January. The conference results will encourage Russia to continue its current policies, work to cut off the opposition's supply lines, while simultaneously encouraging Turkey and Saudi Arabia to take the lead. In undertaking the military operations, they would be starting a military campaign whose shape is still ambiguous. The military operation aims to prevent the situation from escalating to something bigger whether through direct or indirect intervention, especially as both parties have confirmed they will not withstand the situation deteriorating further. There were statements to the effect that Turkey, through Saudi funding, has delivered missile shipments to Free Syrian Army brigades in Aleppo's northern countryside.

The abovementioned will encourage the Russians and the regime to search for other positions such as moving towards Al-raqqah or the areas between Hama and Al-raqqah. They may have to, even if only for show, target Daesh as a way to remove the Saudi excuse for intervening and to calm the international space that accuses them of bombing the moderate opposition. Regarding the Kurdish extension, the Kurdish protection units may move ahead towards Daesh held areas from Al-raqqah's side.

Regarding the Russian-Western dispute, the expectation ceiling for the dispute is the possibility of the west imposing more sanctions on Russia in a time when Russia is

thought to be suffering economically partially due to the Ukrainian crisis, the fall in oil prices, and the millions Russia has spent on Syria until now.

Perhaps part of the 'plan B' Kerry spoke of includes the imposition of a no fly zone or pressure on the Kurdish militia to stop their progression towards areas Ankara considers a red line. This moment is the definitive moment for the United States to return to its role of managing the crisis in the region with relatively greater effectiveness than before.