



SYRIA

LET US MAKE OUR COLLECTIVE VOICE OF REASON BE HEARD

An Urgent Appeal by the U.S. Peace Council

To All of Our Friends in the Peace Movement

Dear Friends and Comrades in Peace,

As you are all well aware, after almost half a decade of violent proxy war, terrorism, and bloodshed in Syria, the warring parties have agreed to meet once again, this time in Geneva, Switzerland, to find a political solution to the ongoing war that has cost the lives of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children, has left millions of Syrians homeless, and has turned millions of others into refugees flooding Syria's neighboring countries and Europe. Many experts believe that this is the last chance for achieving a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis.

It is also well known that these negotiations are being held under extremely complicated circumstances. This conflict has more than two sides and it is certainly not solely about the government of Syria and its opposition. Here we are also dealing with regional power rivalries, with each country pursuing its own interests, and the drive by the United States and NATO states to redraw the map of the Middle East to achieve their own imperial goals. It is also part and parcel of the global drive to encircle, contain, and subdue Russia and China, as a continuation of the neocons' global strategy.

At the global level, the United States and NATO consider Syria as a stepping stone toward a regime change in Iran and ultimately in Russia, and are trying to bring Syria under the West and NATO control by any means possible, including financing, organizing, and arming the militant/terrorist groups fighting the Syrian government, either directly or by using their proxy states and regional allies. This has inevitably put the U.S. on a dangerous confrontation course with Russia, which sees the overthrow of the Syrian government and establishment of another pro-NATO state near its borders as a major threat to its national security. Russia considers this an extension of what NATO is doing in Ukraine. The shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by NATO member Turkey was a clear escalation of this dangerous and intentional confrontation.

At the regional level, the conflict cannot be reduced to a war between two opposing camps only. It is not simply the case of Syria, Iran and Russia on the one side, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, and others, on the other side. Although all of the countries in the latter group are acting within the overall U.S./NATO plan for regime change in Syria, each of them has its own particular agenda for Syria and the region as well, and is trying to push the events in the direction that serves its own interests.

Both Saudi Arabia (closest U.S. ally after Israel) and Qatar (home of the U.S. Central Command) are dead bent on overthrowing the Assad government by use of force. They have been acting as the main dispensers of money and arms to the militant rebels and foreign terrorists in Syria. Saudi Arabia, particularly, has been considering Iran as its main rival and enemy in the region ever since the 1979 revolution that took Iran out of the US/NATO sphere of influence. For the Saudis, the overthrow of

Assad's Syria, the only Arab state independent of US manipulation and a long-time ally of Iran in the Middle East, serves to weaken Iran and ultimately pave the way for regime change in that country.

However, despite agreeing on the goal of forced regime change in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have different ideas about who should replace the Assad government. For the Saudis, who are intent on spreading their own extremist Wahhabi version of Islam in the region, the favorites are ISIS, *Al-Qaeda*-related groups like *al-Nusra* Front, and other extremist Islamic groups like the Islam Army, and the *Asala wa Tanmiya Front* (Authenticity and Growth Front, also supported by U.S.). On the other hand, Qatar, like Turkey, supports Islamist groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, like the Sham Legion and the Turkish-funded *Ahrar al-Sham*. In many cases, each of these groups is itself a coalition of dozens of Islamist groups fighting in Syria, many of whom are in fact foreign fighters. All in all, according to BBC, "there are believed to be as many as 1,000 armed opposition groups in Syria, commanding an estimated 100,000 fighters," each, of course, under the control or influence of one or more of anti-Assad governments involved.

Until recently the main focus of these governments and the United States was on an armed overthrow of the Assad government, and the U.S. made the policy of "Assad must go" a pre-condition for any direct negotiations with the government of Syria. However, the entry of Russian military into the scene has made a military victory for the Western powers and their regional allies virtually impossible and, hence, has forced the U.S. to soften its position on the method, but not goal, of removing Assad. As a result, the focus has now shifted to finding a way for removing the Assad government from power through "peaceful" negotiations with the participation of both the Syrian government and the opposition, and allowing for a "transitional period" for regime change. But there are several sticky points that need to be resolved for these negotiations to proceed and bring any results.

The first fundamental issue here is who should be considered as a legitimate opposition and therefore be allowed to participate in the negotiations. As far as Syrian government is concerned, all those who have engaged in violent armed struggle against the legitimate Syrian state, and are responsible for the death and injury of tens of thousands, should be considered terrorists and must be excluded. Both Iran and Russia have announced their support for the Syrian position. According to Russian Foreign Ministry, "We are still convinced that terrorists of all stripes should be excluded from the political process in Syria...." But this is not what the U.S. and its regional allies have in mind. They are insisting on inclusion of what they term "moderate" armed fighters in the negotiations. Iran's response: "the terrorists will never be allowed to introduce themselves as moderate opposition and decide the future of Syria and the region." Syrian government, on its part, has announced it is ready to attend peace talks with the opposition in Geneva this month, but it wants to see lists of the opposition groups who were due to attend, and ensure that "terrorist" groups would not be represented.

Aside from the issues of who is a terrorist and who is part of the legitimate opposition, another round of maneuvering is under way as well: Each of these hostile countries is now jockeying for the inclusion of its own favorite fighters and the exclusion of those of others in the upcoming negotiations. Saudi Arabia, for its part, is pushing for inclusion of all armed Islamist fighters, and to achieve this, in December of 2015, it organized a three-day conference in Riyadh consisting of over 100 extremist Islamist rebel groups who are calling for regime change in Syria, including some of those considered to be terrorist by the United States. According to Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, "what is noteworthy is the presence of some terrorist groups linked to ISIL in the Riyadh Conference."

The objective of this conference, titled "Conference of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces," was to unite these armed extremist forces around a common platform for the negotiations. On December 10, 2015, the conference issued its "Final Statement," which not only called for "the establishment of a

state ... with no place for Bashar al-Assad or the symbols and pillars of his regime in it or any coming political arrangements,” but took the matter a step further by “stress[ing] that Bashar al-Assad and his circle leave office at the beginning of the transitional period,” in other words, regime change from the beginning. There is no doubt that such a position is aimed at sabotaging the negotiations even before they start. Although the Saudi position is in conflict with the current U.S. position, nevertheless, Secretary of State John Kerry thanked the Saudis for holding the Riyadh Conference. The Saudis’ motive for sabotaging the negotiations, as well as their recent mass execution of 47 people, including a Shi’ite clergy, stems from their nervousness about closer ties that might develop between Iran and the United States as a result of their nuclear agreement, and potential new agreements during Syrian negotiations. They consider a political settlement of the Syrian conflict without an immediate removal of Assad from power as a step toward ending Iran’s isolation and strengthening its position in the region.

What is more significant about the Riyadh Conference, however, is not who participated, but which groups were not allowed to attend. The Saudis made sure that none of the internal moderate (unarmed and non-violent) opposition forces are invited — forces like the Solidarity Party, National Youth Party, and the National Democratic Action Body, who, as a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report concedes, “may very well reflect the views of a significant number of Syrians who would like to see reforms, but who, at the end of the day, prefer Assad over the rebels.” Nor were any Kurdish opposition forces invited to the Riyadh Conference. As Iran’s Fars News Agency complained the day after the Riyadh Conference, “Saudi Arabia hosted a three-day meeting of terrorist groups in Riyadh on December 8-10. The Syrian Kurds, who control large parts of the Northern Syria, had not been invited, but Al-Qaeda’s official branch in Syria, the al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham terrorist groups were there....”

The exclusion of Kurds is also an objective of Turkish government. The Kurds have been a major force in fighting ISIS in the northern part of Syria, but they are at the same time being bombed by the Turkish air force in northern Syria. In effect, Turkey is also directly helping ISIS by opening its borders to the armed militant groups and buying stolen Syrian oil from ISIS. Turkish government does not want to see the inclusion of Kurds (who constitute a third of the Syrian population) in fear that such a move will strengthen the hand of Kurdish organizations like the PKK within Turkey. Israel plays a related role by secretly providing medical care to the wounded ISIS fighters through its borders with Syria along the occupied Golan Heights.

It is clear that these attempts to exclude from negotiations all the internal moderate forces in Syria that represent “a significant number of Syrians” and the Kurds, who constitute one-third of the Syrian population, will only stack the cards against the Syrian people in favor of foreign governments and Islamic extremist/terrorist groups in Syria — an outcome which will not only fail to lead to any peace, but is bound to promote conflagration of the conflict in the region and possible war between the US/NATO Alliance and Russia, both major nuclear-weapons powers.

Dear friends and comrades in the peace movement,

Looking at the whole picture, there is no doubt that we are faced with a dangerously explosive situation in Syria and the Middle East. The true voices of the Syrian people have been silenced by foreign-imposed war and terrorism. We in the U.S. peace and anti-war movement cannot passively watch the intrigues, deceptions and manipulations, which are leading to yet another disaster. We should raise our voices of reason in support of the people of Syria loudly and demand that all parties involved in the Syrian negotiations work honestly and sincerely toward a peaceful solution to the conflict.

We appeal to all of you to help organize demonstrations in front of your local Congressional offices and demand that your Congressperson and Senator pressure the Obama Administration to guarantee that Syrian people are allowed to participate in the negotiations freely, and that the Syrian people alone are allowed to decide the future of their country, not foreign powers and their proxy forces.

We call on all activists in the peace movement to flood the emails and phone lines of the White House and the State Department and demand the following:

- 1) Stop all foreign efforts to force regime change in Syria:**
 - a) Stop bombing Syrian economic infrastructure in the name of fighting ISIS.**
 - b) Stop injecting foreign fighters into Syria.**
 - c) Stop funding, organizing and arming the combatants in Syria.**

- 2) Let the Syrians themselves decide the future of their country free of all foreign intervention:**
 - a) Allow all truly moderate internal opposition groups and the Kurdish organizations to participate in the negotiations.**
 - b) Exclude no segment of the Syrian population from peace negotiations.**
 - c) Exclude all foreign opposition forces, as well as all terrorist organizations, from the negotiations.**

- 3. Lift all sanctions on Syria. Provide humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. Help the Syrian refugees settle wherever they want — including back in Syria.**

- 4. End all wars of aggression, all forms of foreign occupation, and all externally-generated regime change policies in the region.**

*U.S. Peace Council
January 23, 2016*