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# The Pivot to Tehran

Washington long told Iran the price of admission to any Syria peace talks was a commitment to ushering Assad out of power. Not anymore.

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BY COLUM LYNCH, JOHN HUDSON

OCTOBER 29, 2015

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For more than four years, the Obama administration has accused Iran of being a chief instigator of Syria's bloody conflict and has rebuffed persistent appeals by the U.N.'s top peacemakers, who maintained that any durable political settlement would be unthinkable without granting the Islamic Republic a seat at the table. The price of a ticket to peace talks, the State Department long insisted, was an unequivocal commitment from Tehran to endorse a U.N.-brokered peace settlement resulting in a political transition and the departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power.

With Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict turning the tide against the beleaguered U.S.- backed opposition, Washington has finally relented and given Tehran a free pass to political talks in Vienna that will start Friday. On Wednesday, Iran accepted the invitation, though it has made no commitment to endorse the need for a political transition.

"Those who tried to resolve the Syrian crisis have come to the conclusion that without Iran being present, there is no way to reach a reasonable solution to the crisis," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told reporters on Thursday as he arrived in Vienna.

In advance of the talks, Iran **signaled** its willingness to show flexibility on the fate of President Assad. An Iranian deputy foreign minister, Amir Abdollahian, told Iranian media that "Iran does not insist on keeping Assad in power forever," according to Reuters.

"Iran is ready to make a compromise by accepting Assad remaining for six months," an unnamed Iranian official told Reuters. "Of course, it will be up to the Syrian people to decide about the country's fate."

The diplomatic opening comes three months after the longtime enemies struck a landmark deal limiting Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from U.S. and international sanctions. And it has signaled a willingness on the part of Washington and Tehran to move beyond the nuclear pact and explore the possibility of working in concert in a multilateral setting to confront the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Thursday welcomed the decision to include Tehran in the talks, saying he has been urging key international and regional powers, principally the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, to work together to end the conflict.

"I am glad they are now meeting," Ban said in Madrid, where he met with Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and other senior Spanish officials. "I sincerely hope they will really address this issue, with a sense of flexibility, whatever differences they have in their political views."

Members of the Syrian opposition oppose Iran's presence at the talks and fear that it reflects a greater U.S. willingness to accept a political settlement that is more ambiguous about the fate of Assad in the country's future. American officials, however, insist that U.S. policy remains that Assad must go.

"Our engagement is not going to affect our intent or our purpose," Tom Shannon, a senior State Department official, said Thursday.

Still, the decision to permit Iran in the talks is likely to rankle some of America's key allies in the region, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, which fear that U.S. engagement with Iran is reinforcing Tehran's emerging status as a recognized regional powerhouse.

After Iran accepted the invitation on Wednesday, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, **told** reporters at a press conference with British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond in Riyadh Wednesday that the two days of talks will "test the intentions of the Syrians and the Russians," according to a report by Al Jazeera. "If they're serious, we will know, and if they're not serious, we will also know and stop wasting [our] time."

According to the Syrian Arab News Agency, Omran al-Zoubi, Syria's information minister, advised Jubeir to "keep his mouth closed and keep his country out of a matter that is none of his business," referring to the talks in Vienna to end the Syrian war.

The controversy over the attendee list has set the stage for a widely anticipated Vienna summit that will include Russia and Iran, both of which support the Assad regime, and the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, which oppose it. In total, nearly 20 countries have indicated they will attend. Notably, Syria's main political opposition body and leaders of the armed opposition have not been invited.

What drove the Americans and Iranians to drop their opposition to direct talks is disputed.

U.N. peacemakers have been urging the United States since the summer of 2012 — when Kofi Annan, a former U.N. secretary-general, visited Tehran as a U.N. mediator for Syria to secure support for his peace efforts — to allow Iran to participate in talks on a political settlement.

Iran "must be part of any solution" to the conflict in Syria because it is "a key player in the region and a supporter of Syria politically, financially, and militarily," said Ahmad Fawzi, who served as a spokesman for Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, a former Algerian diplomat who succeeded Annan in the job as U.N. special representative for Syria.

In January 2014, Ban went so far as to **invite** Iran to attend political talks in Geneva, only to rescind the invitation at Washington's insistence. Washington had demanded that Iran endorse the 2012 **Geneva Communiqué**, a U.N.-brokered agreement that sets the terms for a transitional government with "full executive powers." The United States and its allies believe the Geneva agreement sets the stage for Assad's removal from power. But Russia, which also signed the accord, doesn't see it that way. It has argued that any decision on the future of Syria will require the agreement of Syrian leaders, including officials in Assad's government.

“If Iran does not fully and publicly accept the Geneva Communiqué, the invitation must be rescinded,” then-State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki **said** at the time. “This is something Iran has never done publicly and something we have long made clear is required.”

In explaining the U.S. shift, Shannon told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday that the decision to invite the Iranians to the negotiating table was driven by Russia and Iran’s expanded military presence in Syria in recent weeks.

“The Russian and Iranian presence or support for Assad is nothing new, but the Russian military presence and airstrikes [are] something new; the presence of Iranian troops and special forces is something new,” he said.

“For this reason, the secretary thought it was time to bring everybody together and effectively call their bluff, determine whether or not their ... public commitment to fighting ISIL and terrorism is a meaningful one,” Shannon said, using an alternative name for the Islamic State, also known as ISIS.

He also added that the talks would be a test as to whether Russia and Iran are prepared to “work broadly with the international community to convince Mr. Assad that during a political transition process he will have to go.”

Iran’s decision to accept the U.S. invitation also amounted to an about-face.

Last month, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, swore off any new talks with the United States, saying the Iran nuclear deal was an exception to the rule. “We approved talks with the United States about the nuclear issue specifically,” Khamenei told an audience in Tehran last month. “We have not allowed talks with the United States in other fields, and we will not negotiate with them.”

On Thursday, Zarif made clear he was ready to work with world powers, including the United States, to resolve the Syrian crisis.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian diplomat and a research scholar at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, said the United States has realized it can't deny Iran a role in the region — no more than Tehran can deny Washington its own place in the Mideast.

"Now they have come to understand that negotiations and cooperation with Iran [are] essential to bring the crisis in the region to a peaceful resolution," Mousavian said. "It is clear for the [United States] — now that they have failed and they have not been able to contain ISIS, either in Iraq or Syria."

The United States, he added, "has recognized that fighting ISIS without ground forces is impossible and the [United States] is not going to [commit] ground forces to fight ISIS." Most of the fighting forces, he said, will come from Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Still, the decision has sparked confusion and, in some cases, anger among critics of the Assad regime. Many leaders of the Syrian opposition, who were not invited to the talks, are vocally opposed to Iran's attendance.

"Iran is part of the problem and not the solution, and its participation in the meeting will prove that to the world," Bashar al-Zoubi of the Yarmouk Army, a group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, told [Reuters](#).

U.S. officials say they're currently embracing a "two-pronged approach" to resolving the Syrian crisis. The first step is an intensifying air and ground campaign against the Islamic State, including more airstrikes and the resupplying of moderate opposition fighters in northern Syria to take the fight to Raqqa, the Islamic State's stronghold. The second step is an accelerated diplomatic outreach involving Iran.

In a Wednesday speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Secretary of State John Kerry said the second step would be painfully difficult. "The challenge that we face in Syria today is nothing less than to chart a course out of hell," he said.

Still, he underscored that all sides of the conflict do share a number of common goals.

“We actually all agree that the status quo is untenable,” he said. “We all agree that we need to find a way to have a political solution. We all agree that a victory by Daesh or any other terrorist group absolutely has to be prevented. We all agree that it’s imperative to save the state of Syria and the institutions on which it is built and preserve a united and secular Syria.” Daesh is an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

Despite the past U.S. ban on Iranian participation in political talks on Syria, the United States has been willing to sit down at the same table with Iranian officials at U.N.-sponsored talks on the humanitarian cost of the war.

In late 2013, Valerie Amos, the U.N. humanitarian chief at the time, organized a series of discrete **meetings** with key governments, including the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, to see if they could influence the warring parties to allow for the distribution of humanitarian assistance to needy Syrians throughout the country.

But there is little evidence that such cooperation resulted in a significant improvement in the relief effort in Syria. Importantly, those talks did not focus on bringing about a political transition in Syria, given Iran’s refusal to accept the Geneva Communiqué.

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## Diplomats Meet in Vienna for Syria Talks

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BY J. DANA STUSTER

OCTOBER 29, 2015

Talks in Vienna to discuss resolving the Syrian civil war begin today. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is leading a delegation to the talks — it is the first time that Iran has been **invited** to participate in negotiations on Syria, a move that has drawn ire from Syrian rebel groups. The United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, among others, are also participating in the talks. The Assad regime and Syrian rebel groups are not part of the Vienna discussions.

In a speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace delivered shortly before departing for Vienna, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry **said** that the “challenge that we face in Syria today is nothing less than to chart a course out of hell.” Kerry stressed the importance of a political solution to the civil war for U.S. counterterrorism efforts. “At the end of the day, nothing would do more to bolster the fight against Daesh than a political transition that sidelines Assad so that we can unite more of the country against extremism,” he said.

### **Saudi Arabia Drops Arms to Allies in Yemen but Optimistic about Ending War**

Saudi Arabia airdropped weapons to Yemeni ground forces in Taiz yesterday, continuing its assault on Houthi rebel forces. But Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir **expressed** optimism about ending the war, telling reporters, “One of the indications that the campaign is nearing its end is the fact that ... Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis are accepting U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216 and entering into talks the U.N. on that basis.” Yemeni officials say they will request accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council after the war, Al-Arabiya **reports**.

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### **Headlines**

- Financial **pressures** in the Iraqi government have officials delaying planned weapons deals in order to prioritize hiring 10,000 more paramilitary forces to fight the Islamic State.



- Islamic extremists **threw** a bomb from a motorcycle at the campus of the University of Aden, damaging the College of Commerce and Economics; militants had previously threatened the school for not enforcing gender segregation in classes.
- Two more knife attacks **occurred** in Hebron, leaving one Israel Defense Force soldier wounded and the two assailants dead; there have been five stabbing incidents in Hebron this week alone.
- Iranian poets Fatemeh Ekhtesari and Mehdi Musavi have been **sentenced** to 99 lashes for shaking hands with the opposite sex and lengthy prison terms for "insulting the state," according to a new U.N. report.
- Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, who is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence for making comments deemed insulting to Islam, has been **awarded** the European parliament's Sakharov freedom of thought prize; Badawi was also awarded the Pen Pinter Prize for free speech earlier this month.

### Arguments and Analysis

**“Do Syrian refugees pose a terrorism threat?”** (Daniel L. Byman, Markaz)

“If the refugees are treated as a short-term humanitarian problem rather than as a long-term integration challenge, then we are likely to see this problem worsen. Radicals will be among those who provide the religious, educational, and social support for the refugees — creating a problem where none existed. Indeed, the refugees need a comprehensive and long-term package that includes political rights, educational support, and economic assistance as well as immediate humanitarian aid, particularly if they are admitted in large numbers. If they cannot be integrated into local communities, then they risk perpetuating, or even exacerbating, the tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Europe. Despite their current gratitude for sanctuary in Europe, over time the refugees may be disenfranchised and become alienated. We’ve seen this movie before, where anger and disaffection fester, creating ‘suspect communities’ that do not cooperate with law enforcement and security agencies and allow terrorists to recruit and operate with little interference.”

**“Saudi-Egyptian Relations at the Crossroads”** (Fahad Nazer, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington)

“However, the mutual push toward warmer Egyptian-Saudi ties is not taking place in a vacuum. There are several significant policy differences between them, for example regarding Syria and Yemen, which the two countries must finesse in order to remain close. And Saudi Arabia, in particular, is developing a new and more assertive regional profile and proactive security doctrine that adds an additional context to relations with Egypt. Riyadh’s unprecedented military operation against the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen and its publicly acknowledged participation in U.S.-led airstrikes against strongholds of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria, are a stark departure from Saudi Arabia’s traditional security and foreign policy postures that favored behind-the-scenes diplomacy and accommodation.”

**-J. Dana Stuster**

Allison Shelley/Getty Images

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