



Peace Talks on Syria Get Off to Tense Start in Switzerland

An exchange of words between Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (shown on right) created a tense start to the [Geneva II Conference on Syria](#) (a UN-backed conference called to negotiate a settlement to the three-year-long Syrian civil war) which started on January 22 in the Swiss lakeside city of Montreux.



Muallem first argued with Ban — who is chairing the conference — about the length of his speech and then asserted that only the Syrian people could decide on President Assad's future.

Speaking in a room separate from Muallem, Syrian opposition leader Ahmad Jarba charged that the human rights violations in Syria were reminiscent of Nazi Germany, and said that Assad's departure should be a precondition for peace.

[BBC News](#) reported that Muallem and Jarba won't be in the negotiating room together until Friday, when the talks resume in Geneva. Wednesday's preliminary meeting consisted of speeches delivered by about 40 foreign ministers. Friday's meetings will involve direct negotiations between the involved parties.

Friday's conference will be the first face-to-face meeting between the Syrian government and the main opposition — [The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces](#) — since the civil war began in 2011.

Following the tense first day of sometimes impassioned speeches, Ban spoke at an evening news conference that BBC described as "fractious." Ban, referring to the turmoil and suffering in Syria, said: "Enough is enough. The time has come to negotiate," and noted that "the really hard work begins on Friday." Ban continued: "We have a difficult road ahead, but it can be done and it must be done."

British-based [Sky News reported](#) that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, after having discussions with Muallem and Jarba, urged that the talks not be focused on leadership change in Syria. "As for guarantees that the talks will not collapse — it is necessary to influence both delegations so that this does not happen," said Lavrov, adding, "The main thing is to start the process."

The "leadership change" that Lavrov referred to is a key plank of the "Geneva Communiqué," a document issued by a UN-backed meeting on June 30, 2012.

[The key steps in the transition outlined in the communiqué include:](#)

- Establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that could include members of the government and opposition, and [which] should be formed on the basis of mutual consent
- Participation of all groups and segments of society in Syria in a meaningful national dialogue



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process

- Review of the constitutional order and the legal system
- Free and fair multi-party elections for the new institutions and offices that have been established
- Full representation of women in all aspects of the transition

During the news conference at the end of Geneva II's first day, Ban said he was disappointed with the attitudes of both the Syrian government and its ally, Iran, in rejecting the communiqué's call for a transitional government.

At his own [press conference](#) on January 22, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry asserted that the Geneva Communiqué's call for a transition government was a critical focus of the summit:

So the fact that 40 countries and organizations came here from near and far — from Asia, from South Central Asia, from Europe, from America, from the North American continent, from Latin America, from Africa, north and south — all came united in support of the Syrian people, in support of their hopes for the future of Syria, and in support of the Geneva communiqué which does one thing that is of great significance: It recognizes that a political transition is the only way to go and that the political transition required under Geneva I is a transition government with full executive authority by mutual consent. Every entity here today with one exception talked about that and embraced the Geneva I communiqué.

The "one exception" Kerry referred to above is Syria.

In his statement, Kerry also said: "This is a regime backed by Iran and by a terrorist organization that has crossed over from Lebanon into Syria into order to fight. There is no one who has done more to make Syria a magnet for terrorists than Bashar al-Assad."

The terrorist organization from Lebanon that Kerry referred to is Hezbollah, which entered the civil war in 2013 in support of Assad's army. While Hezbollah is indisputably a terrorist organization, Kerry conveniently made no mention of the fact that segments of the Syrian opposition also are connected with terrorists.

A [McClatchyDC report](#) on January 17 noted that Abu Khaled al Suri, a top figure in the rebel group Ahrar al Sham, acknowledged on January 17 that he considers himself a member of al-Qaeda. The report noted that Ahrar al Sham is "one of the most militarily effective groups fighting to topple the regime of President Bashar Assad."

Another opposition group fighting the Syrian government that has strong connections with al-Qaeda is the [Al-Nusra Front](#).

A [Washington Post](#) report on January 30, 2012 noted:

Syrian opposition leaders report an alarming growth within their ranks of fighters from Jabhar al-Nusra, an extremist group linked to al-Qaeda.... The al-Qaeda affiliate now accounts for 7.5 percent to 9 percent of the Free Syrian Army's total fighters, up sharply from an estimated 3 percent three months ago and 1 percent at the beginning of the year....

As the rebels gain momentum, the spoils of war apparently are going to the rebel group that captures a particular Syrian army base. This is one factor boosting the rapid growth of Jabhat al-Nusra. Its fighters provide the muscle and weapons and, as a result, explained an official of the NGO that represents the moderate FSA [Free Syrian Army] fighters: "They will get all the goodies,



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reputation and recognition.”

The [Abdullah Azzam Brigades](#), formed in 2009 as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, acknowledged in a statement issued in June 2012 by the group’s emir, Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid, that it was involved in the fighting against Assad’s forces.

Members of Congress have also pointed to the connection between the Syrian opposition forces and the al-Qaeda terrorist network. Among them was Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) who said during a hearing [of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) last May: “This is an important moment. You will be funding, today, the allies of al Qaeda.” Paul was addressing his fellow senators, nearly all of whom voted to send arms to the Syrian rebels.

As we noted in a recent article, the reason stated for sending U.S. troops to Afghanistan in late 2001 was to fight al-Qaeda, which had been identified as being responsible for the 9/11 attacks. During a statement to the nation on September 11, 2001, President Bush said: “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”

Yet today, our government’s official foreign policy favors one side in a civil war in which the terrorist group al-Qaeda has a stake against another side in which the terrorist group Hezbollah has a stake.

Will the United States continue to be involved in Syria?

During the January 22 press conference, Michel Ghandour from Al Hurra TV asked Kerry: “Is the military option still on the table in dealing with Syria?”

Kerry replied, in part:

President Obama has never taken any option off the table in dealing with Syria.... So the President has fully left that option on the table with respect to the compliance issue of the chemical weapons, and depending on what happens in the future, the President never takes any option off the table.

Photo of Ban Ki-moon: AP Images

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