



Syria Peace Talks Elusive Despite Chemical Weapons Diplomacy

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September 18, 2013

STATE DEPARTMENT —

The U.S.-Russian framework for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons does not address the political divisions that have long delayed peace talks.

Ending day-to-day combat is not part of the deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program.

But the biggest international intervention so far is an opportunity to do more, says European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

"The latest development therefore, that we have, is an opportunity to reinvigorate, not just, not just trying to sort out the chemical weapons issue but the broader political dimension," she said.

Political talks have been repeatedly delayed by disarray within the Syrian opposition leadership and by disagreement over who else might attend. Russia wants Iran to join the talks. But Washington objects because Iranian forces are fighting alongside Syrian government troops.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said there is no backing off efforts to get to peace talks.

"Our goal remains to convene a second Geneva conference to bring all sides together to agree on a political solution to the conflict. And we will work with Russia on bringing that about, as soon as possible," he said.

Figuring out how to round up 1,000 metric tons of poison gas in the middle of a civil war is already distracting, from getting to peace talks, says Human Rights Watch acting Washington director Sarah Margon.

"We have been very narrowly focused on chemical weapons. And while Secretary Kerry has talked about the potential for negotiations, a Geneva Two down the road, from what we can tell, there unfortunately isn't a lot of urgency in moving that," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said it may be time to "force" opposition leaders to peace talks. He blames delay on those who threaten Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"If some find it more important to constantly threaten, to intimidate, to look for a reason to attack, then this is probably a way to hint to regime opponents that new provocations are expected from them. It might also lead to a complete disruption of the Geneva 2 process," he said.

But it's the absence of a political alternative to President Assad that makes getting to talks so hard, says Cato Institute analyst Doug Bandow.

"The alternative is not Bashar al-Assad and so-and-so who we know and have some trust in. It's Bashar al-Assad and potentially chaos," he said.

U.S. Institute of Peace analyst Manal Omar said confusion within the opposition undermines a push toward talks.

"What would happen if Bashar were to either leave or to step down or to be removed? There hasn't been enough, I think, reassurances from the opposition groups that there would be ways to really control Syria in the aftermath," he said.

Kerry and Lavrov meet in New York next week to discuss a timetable for Syrian peace talks, but Kerry says that will depend heavily on progress on chemical weapons.