
January 10, 2014

'Friends of Syria' to Meet in Paris Sunday

by Scott Stearns

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry meets in Paris Sunday with foreign ministers of countries who back opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. They are trying to bridge serious differences within the opposition ahead of Syrian peace talks planned for Geneva later this month. But Syrian divisions are complicating efforts to come up with a transitional government to end the war.

Iraqi forces fighting back against Al-Qaida-affiliated militia show how far Syria's internal divisions have spread.

Assad loyalists control the capital Damascus and ethnic-Alawite areas along the Mediterranean as well as parts of central Syria in their fight against largely-Sunni rebels there -- while continuing to battle Kurdish fighters in the north and Druze militia in the south.

Cato Institute analyst Doug Bandow says if no transitional government emerges from this month's Geneva talks, Syria may end up a more-permanently divided nation,

"I think one alternative, and it might be the best alternative is essentially the regime controls kind of a coastal area, a more Alawite area. And then there's a rebel area, and there's a Kurdish area. That might be the best you can get. Otherwise I think it's a fight to the finish," Bandow said.

Some of the fiercest fighting is within the opposition itself -- between the main rebel Free Syrian Army and more extremist militias, some of whom are affiliated with al-Qaida. There are even divisions within those more extremist elements. So much so that the head of the powerful al-Nusra Front is calling for a cease-fire with a group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. But there is no keeping Syria together without strong central authority, says former U.S. ambassador Adam Ereli.

"Syria, I think the ethnic divisions are less along geographic lines with the exception largely of the Alawite and the Druze. But if you don't have responsible central government, those areas will split off," he said.

A Balkanized Syria may be less troubling than current trends toward a broader breakdown, says U.S. Institute of Peace analyst Steve Heydemann, because the division of the former Yugoslavia remained largely within its international borders.

"I think the expectation was we could see a similar outcome in Syria -- that we would experience a process of partition, of Balkanization but it would not produce a cascade of state collapse across the Arab Levant. Now, I don't think we can be so confident about that," Heydemann said.

Syrians themselves see the division of their country as an affront to national pride, says American University professor Akbar Ahmed.

"They don't want their country broken up because there's still the desire, the nationalism, the romance of holding on to the larger and not breaking away to the smaller unless things become so bad that you can not hold on," he said.

Divisions within the political opposition weaken prospects for peace talks as foreign ministers work to get a broader, more representative opposition delegation to meet with Assad officials.