

## *From Russia with Love? by James Denselow*



This time last year the eyes of the world were focused on the Swiss town of Geneva for much anticipated Syria peace talks. In attendance were most players (excluding Iran) and a record breaking number of journalists. The stakes were high and the profile stratospheric - but analysts' forecasts of little progress were proved right as no agreements were made and Lakhdar Brahimi - the UN/Arab League diplomat at the heart of things - departed by May.

A year and 76,000 more deaths later and a very different conference came together in Moscow. The Russian capital has hosted historic events in the past including a conference in 1943 that saw the major allies of World War II chart the future of the continent.

Such grand ambitions are absent ahead of this incarnation with a Russian moderator saying that the event will be a success if the participants simply agree to talk again in future.

### **Parameters of conflict**

Unlike the Brahimi-led Geneva II conference, hosting a peace conference in Russia - a longstanding supporter of the Assad regime - shows how much the parameters of the conflict have changed in a year. In particular the ISIL factor has dominated both the media and political bandwidth in the West over the last year with US Secretary of State John Kerry going so far as to describe defeating the group as "the challenge of our time".

Yet despite the low expectations, the Russian hosts, battered by both the collapse of their currency and the continued conflict in Ukraine, will have to show that their good offices brought something positive to a conflict that at its current rate could see a quarter of a million people dead by the end of 2015.

The Russians have some serious history when it comes to Syria.

Since the 1950s, tens of thousands of Syrians have been educated in Russia, while Russian expertise has created much of Syria's infrastructure. Some of this includes one-third of Syria's electrical power capability, one-third of its oil-producing facilities and help with building the massive Euphrates dam which saw a threefold expansion of irrigation in Syria.

In 1958, Bashar's father Hafez travelled to Moscow to learn night flying. Today it is the various Syrian opposition groups who may feel that they are flying into the darkness by attending the conference.

It is rare not to see the word "divided" following any mention of the Syrian Opposition and there is a mix of reaction to invitations to travel to the Russian capital. Newly elected "Syrian National Coalition" chief, Khaled Khoja, has said the group will not attend the talks whilst

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Qadri Jamil from the "Popular Front of Change and Liberation" called the talks "a glimmer of hope".

### **Moscow in the spotlight**

This "glimmer" may be based less on the intentions of the regime in Damascus but more the sense that Moscow will have to show something from putting the whole thing together.

One scenario would see the delegates from the regime bemoan the absence of any unified or legitimate Opposition and use the conference to grandstand as to them being the answer to the question of how to defeat ISIL.

With ISIL controlling over half of the country (albeit mostly desert) this argument is increasingly appealing to a variety of figures in the West. The notion of engaging with Assad received a boost with the Danish Foreign Minister putting his head about the parapet to say exactly that, before somewhat bizarrely adding that the Syrian president still has no place in the country's future. Another scenario could see the regime commit to short term measures to show that it is a player that people can do business with.

This could range from releasing prisoners to the more ambitious proposal put forward by UN envoy Staffan de Mistura to put a freeze on areas of intense fighting including in the battered city of Aleppo. This rise of ISIL, the Paris attacks and changing regional relations such as that Qatari-Egyptian detente and the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia have all factored into this window of opportunity that the Russians have carved out.

With expectations low but Moscow's reputation at stake it has made for a fascinating week. Can the diplomatic process change the metrics from how to win a war over Syria to how to create a peace?

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