

Iran, Russia, Turkey agree on dialogue between Damascus, opposition groups

International Desk

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on Saturday that the parties to the Astana format talks agreed on the initiation of "political dialogue between the Syrian government and the legitimate opposition groups" to resolve the Arab country's new crisis.

Araghchi made the remarks after a meeting with his Turkish and Russian counterparts in Qatar's capital as they discussed a solution to the crisis in Syria, where the situation has changed dramatically in recent days after rapid gains by foreign-backed militants who oppose the Syrian government.

The three countries have been involved in the so-called Astana format talks seeking a political settlement in Syria since 2017.

Araghchi said the three countries agreed that, "The conflicts should end immediately and the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Syria must be respected."

The Iranian foreign minister said Iran and Russia will consult with the Syrian

government on talks with opposition groups.

Araghchi said during a joint press conference with his Iraqi and Syrian counterparts in Baghdad on Friday that the offensive in Syria poses a "threat" to the whole Middle East.

Threat to region

"This threat will not be limited to Syria and will affect Syria's neighboring countries such as Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey," he added.

On November 27, a coalition of insurgents led by the militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched an offensive from its stronghold in Idlib, seizing dozens of localities and the strategic cities of Aleppo and Hama, among others. Syrian militants claimed on Saturday they had started to surround Syria's government-held capital Damascus.

"Our forces have begun the final phase of encircling the capital, Damascus," said militant commander Hassan Abdel Ghani.

He had earlier said forces had taken control of the Saasaa penitentiary in the Da-



AFP

mascus countryside.

The Syrian Defense Ministry denied the army had fled positions.

"There is no truth to news claiming our armed forces, present in all areas of the Damascus countryside, have withdrawn," it said.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) war monitor claimed that government forces were pulling out of towns as little as 10 kilometers (six miles) from Damascus.

'Terrorist' rebels

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Syria must not be allowed to fall into the hands of "terrorist" rebels.

"It's inadmissible to allow the terrorist group to take control of the lands in violation of agreements which exist, starting with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 which strongly reiterated sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of the Syrian Arab Republic," Lavrov said at an event in Qatar, referring

to a 2015 UN resolution for a political settlement in Syria.

Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani said Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had failed to engage with his people and address issues like the return of refugees during a period of calm in the country's war which began in 2011.

"Assad didn't seize these opportunities to start engaging and restoring his relationship with his people, and we didn't see any serious movement, whether it's on the return of the refugees or on reconciling with his own people."

Doha had given early support to the militants since the beginning of foreign-backed war in 2011. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose country has also been supporting various militant groups since 2011, said Friday he "hoped the advance of the rebels would continue without incident," openly identifying their objective as Damascus.

Turkey shares a 900-kilometre (560-mile) border with Syria and hosting nearly three million Syrian refugees.

South Korean president escapes impeachment over martial law



South Korea's embattled President Yoon Suk Yeol avoided an opposition-led attempt to impeach him over his short-lived imposition of martial law, as most ruling party lawmakers boycotted a parliamentary vote Saturday to deny a two-thirds majority needed to suspend his presidential power.

Opposition parties could submit a new impeachment motion after a new parliamentary session opens next Wednesday, AP reported.

The scrapping of the motion is expected

to intensify public protests calling for Yoon's ouster and deepen political chaos in South Korea, with a survey suggesting a majority of South Koreans support the president's impeachment. Yoon's martial law declaration drew criticism from his own ruling conservative People Power Party, but it is also determined to oppose Yoon's impeachment apparently because it fears losing the presidency to liberals. After the motion fell through, members of the main liberal opposition Democratic Party rallied inside the National Assembly, chanting slogans calling for Yoon's impeachment or resignation. The party's floor leader, Park Chan-dae, said it will soon prepare for a new impeachment motion.

"We'll surely impeach Yoon Suk Yeol, who is the greatest risk to Republic of Korea," party leader Lee Jae-myung said. "We'll surely bring back this country to normal before Christmas Day or year's end."

On Saturday, tens of thousands of people densely packed several blocks of roads leading up to the National Assembly, waving banners, shouting slogans and dancing. Protesters also gathered in front of PPP's headquarters near the Assembly, angrily shouting for its lawmakers to vote to impeach Yoon.

Earlier Saturday, Yoon issued a public apology over the martial law decree, saying he won't shirk legal or political responsibility for the declaration and promising not to make another attempt to impose martial law.

Since taking office in 2022, Yoon has struggled to push his agenda through an opposition-controlled parliament and grappled with low approval ratings amid scandals involving himself and his wife. In his martial law announcement on Tuesday night, Yoon called parliament a "den of criminals" bogging down state affairs and vowed to eliminate "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces."

Iran hits back at 'deceptive' remarks by British FM

Iran rejected "deceptive and divisive" remarks by British Foreign Secretary David Lammy against the Islamic Republic, saying the UK tops the list of countries stoking insecurity in the world.

Addressing a NATO meeting in Brussels on Wednesday, Lammy said the world was "living in dangerous times", but then pointed the finger at Iran for the tremendous aggression that West Asia is going through, Press TV reported.

"Whilst we acknowledge the British foreign secretary's remarks that the world is currently in a fairly dangerous period and is plagued with wars, the question is which actors have a fundamental role in the creation of this situation," Director General of the Western Europe Department at the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Majid Nili Ahmadabadi stated late Friday.

"Without a doubt, Britain, with its long history of interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and illegal inter-

ference in the West Asian region, especially through arming and financing the only occupation and apartheid regime in the world (Israel), is at the top of the list of those accused of insecurity and instability in the world," he added.

Nili Ahmadabadi categorically refuted Lammy's accusation of Iran's involvement in the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, urging Britain to stop shifting blame onto others for the existing crises in Europe.

He said the current problems in Europe are the result of the "arrogant and expansionist policies of Britain and some of its allies" toward other countries, advising British authorities to adopt a "realistic approach and play a constructive and helpful role in international developments."

He also dismissed the British foreign secretary's claims about Iran's civilian nuclear program and its missile capabilities, terming them as baseless and interventionist.

Syria's future and...

Ankara, which has supported armed opposition groups in recent years, can now expand its influence in northern Syria, leveraging their recent successes in capturing key provincial centers, particularly Aleppo, Syria's economic hub. This development will undoubtedly significantly impact the resistance front. Furthermore, the central government's loss of control over strategic northern regions could challenge the resistance axis's communication corridor from Iran to Lebanon and Iran's access to the Mediterranean, directly affecting our country's strategic interests in the region.

Another notable development is the evolution in the nature and approach of opposition forces, particularly HTS. This group, once known as al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, has shown significant changes in its approach in recent years. Their focus on local governance, efforts to gain minority support, and pragmatic approach to managing controlled territories indicate their evolution from a purely military organization to a political-military actor. This transformation could have important implications for Syria's future and how regional and international actors engage with this group.

In such circumstances, the Islamic Republic of Iran faces complex strategic

challenges in dealing intelligently with Syria's developments and preserving its strategic interests. Clearly, while maintaining support for the Assad government as a strategic ally and key link in the resistance axis appears necessary, field realities and existing limitations necessitate a review of regional strategy and adoption of a flexible approach. In this context, Iran faces several strategic options, each with its own implications and considerations. The first option is strengthening military support for the Assad government through increased resistance forces presence and military equipment provision. While this approach could help stabilize Syrian army defensive lines in the short term, given existing limitations, regional conflicts, and the Syrian army's weakness and low morale, it would impose significant costs on our country. Moreover, this approach could escalate regional tensions and increase the likelihood of direct confrontation with other actors.

The second option is pursuing mediation and supporting a political solution. This approach could include active participation in peace negotiations and efforts to preserve strategic interests through political agreements, as exemplified by the Doha meeting attended by foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey, and Russia. The advantage of this approach is reduced direct

costs and the possibility of preserving some interests within a comprehensive agreement. However, its success depends on cooperation from other regional and international actors and flexibility from all parties involved.

The third option is redefining regional strategy and adapting policies to new realities. This approach could include establishing connections with new actors, including moderate opposition groups, and focusing on preserving vital interests under new conditions. Although some public opinion might view this approach as a retreat from previous positions, it could help preserve our country's interests and the resistance front while preventing further losses in the current situation.

Ultimately, recent developments in Syria mark a turning point in the crisis, requiring tactful and appropriate responses from involved actors. The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a key regional player, must maintain vigilance regarding field developments while adopting a realistic and flexible approach. This approach should be based on accurate understanding of existing realities, cost-benefit analysis of various options, and efforts to preserve vital interests within the framework of available capabilities and limitations. Recent experiences show that regional

stability is more fragile than previously thought, and no situation, even apparently stable agreements, can guarantee long-term interests. In such conditions, strategic flexibility and ability to adapt to changing circumstances are key to maintaining and securing national inter-

ests. This requires increasing domestic solidarity, continuous review of past ineffective or failed policies, moving beyond outdated figures and approaches, strengthening diplomatic capabilities, and maintaining readiness for various scenarios.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist

