

In Sochi, Putin Tells Iran, Turkey of 'Real Chance' to End Syria War

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Hassan Rouhani, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan / Kremlin Press Service / TASS

(Bloomberg) — Russian President Vladimir Putin said there's a "real chance" to end the 6 1/2 year civil war in Syria as he met his counterparts from Iran and Turkey seeking to seal a peace deal that is likely to keep his ally Bashar al-Assad in power.

Putin's summit talks Wednesday with Iran's Hassan Rouhani and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Black Sea resort of Sochi came just two days after he hosted Assad in a surprise visit. The Russian leader also spoke to U.S. President Donald Trump and leaders of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt as the Kremlin rallies international support for its diplomatic drive.

"The militants in Syria have been dealt a decisive blow and a real chance has appeared to bring an end to many years of civil war," Putin said, adding that a political settlement in Syria is now the "strategic task." Assad confirmed his commitment to a political process including a new constitution and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections, the Kremlin said in a statement after the call with Trump.

Putin is taking the dominant role in efforts to end the bloody conflict after a Russian military campaign since 2015 succeeded in rescuing Assad against a range of armed foes including jihadists and rebels supported by the U.S. and its allies. That has left the U.S., which under Trump's predecessor Barack Obama pushed for Assad's ouster, on the sidelines.

Differences Remain

The new U.S. administration says it still doesn't see a future for the Syrian leader but isn't making his departure a precondition for the talks aimed at securing an end to the civil war that has killed 400,000 people and displaced millions more.

Putin also will have to overcome differences with the participants in Wednesday's summit. Turkey, which had long sought Assad's ouster, now is seeking a freer hand to fight Kurdish forces in Syria, who have been instrumental in the defeat of Islamic State. Iran, meanwhile, is seen as unwilling to accept any compromise that could weaken Assad's authority.

"Critical decisions" will be made in Sochi, Erdogan said. The Syrian people won't allow foreigners to interfere in their domestic affairs, Rouhani said.

In the Saudi capital, Riyadh, Syrian opposition groups also met Wednesday to discuss forming a single bloc to negotiate with Assad. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir told state-run television that the kingdom would support the Syrian opposition groups to "emerge united" from the Riyadh meeting.

The leader of the main Syrian opposition group, which is backed by the West, resigned unexpectedly Monday. A unified platform including factions close to Moscow will be a "tame" counterparty for the Syrian regime at the negotiating table, according to Robert Ford, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria who's now a fellow at Yale University and the Middle East Institute in Washington.

The political process "won't be easy," said Putin. "It will require compromises and concessions from all sides, including the Syrian government. I am counting on Russia, Iran and Turkey making the utmost effort to ensure this brings results."

Russia, while backing Assad, is likely to insist he accepts a new constitution that strips away some of his powers, said Sami Nader, head of the Beirut-based Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs.

"In any case he will remain in power but he will be a very much weakened Assad," Nader said by phone.

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