



Photo: Austrian Foreign Ministry, Flickr, 17 May 2016

The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) is a working group formed to find a diplomatic solution to the Syria crisis. The ISSG is co-chaired by the US and Russia, and was established during the ['Vienna Talks'](#) in the [fall of 2015](#). The 19 founding ISSG members were China, Egypt, EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE, UK, UN, and the US. Membership has since expanded to include the Arab League, Australia, Canada, Japan, Netherlands, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and Spain.

The ISSG's initial efforts produced a set of common principles in line with the 2012 [Geneva Communiqué](#). They also established a timeline beginning in January 2016 for diplomatic negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition, the start of a political transition within six months, and elections within 18 months. The UN Security Council (UNSC) endorsed this strategy in December 2015 with the adoption of [Resolution 2254](#).

After a rushed effort to get the parties to the negotiating table in Geneva quickly [fell apart](#) in January 2016, the ISSG reconvened in Munich to focus on improving the situation inside of Syria before trying again. On February 11 the [ISSG announced](#) that its members would exercise "their influence with all parties on the ground" to facilitate humanitarian access and to start a nationwide [Cessation of Hostilities](#) (CoH). By placing unprecedented pressure on both parties, the US and Russia managed to achieve limited [progress](#) on getting aid delivered to besieged areas and a marked reduction of violence. The Syrian government and 97 armed Syrian opposition groups agreed to the CoH, which came into effect on February 27, 2016 at 00:00 Damascus time. Violence abruptly stopped across most of Syria for 24 hours. Following that initial period, violence resumed in some areas but at a much lower rate. The CoH excluded UNSC-designated terrorist groups [ISIS](#) and [Jabhat al-Nusra](#).

With improved conditions inside Syria, the [Intra-Syrian Talks](#) restarted in Geneva in March. The ISSG created a Ceasefire Task Force and a Humanitarian Task Force to maintain conditions on the ground that would allow the negotiating parties to focus on political transition. Following the March [negotiating round](#), the number of CoH violations escalated and aid convoy approvals slowed. Conditions continued to worsen during the second round of talks in April. On the final day, a government air strike targeted an [MSF-supported](#) hospital in Aleppo killing approximately 55 people. UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, admitted that the negotiations had been [overshadowed](#) by violence, and called on the ISSG to hold a ministerial-level meeting to re-launch the CoH before a third round of Geneva negotiations reconvened.

Since the April round of Geneva talks, the ISSG initiated half-hearted measures such as local temporary ceasefires, a UN [deadline](#) for emergency airdrops to besieged areas, and creation of a Russian-US Coordination Cell in Geneva to improve CoH violation monitoring. These initiatives were not enforced and little improved on the ground. At the same time, Russia significantly increased its bombing campaign and tensions between the ISSG co-chairs continued to rise. De Mistura has not set a date for the next round of Intra-Syrian talks and [stresses the need](#) to avoid another negotiating round with no concrete outcomes.

Today the CoH exists in name only. The clock is ticking towards the [August 1 deadline](#) for parties to agree on a framework for political transition, and the diplomatic solution is in considerable jeopardy. Unless the ISSG is able to overcome recent challenges quickly and reinstate progress on the ground, Syria's most promising peace initiative in years will slip away and leave the country without a path forward.