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Assad Pulls Ahead in Syrian War. Putin, Khamenei Are Co-Victors

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March 5 has been set as the date for peace talks to open in Moscow between the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime, debkaf file reveals here exclusively. Opposition leader Moaz al-Khatib is waiting to meet the Assad regime's representative, possibly Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, in the Russian capital by the end of February to set up the talks. Bashar Assad has taken his resignation off the agenda and insists on reserving the option to run again for president in 2014. He is backed in this by President Vladimir Putin. And even the Syrian opposition appears to have tacitly bowed to this precondition – an admission that the rebel movement has reached its limit and Assad's genocidal, no-holds-barred tactics have paid off. With all their acclaimed victories, rebel forces know that their desperate bid to conquer Damascus was repulsed by the Syrian army's superior fire power and heavy armor. They were thrown back from the heart of Aleppo, Syria's largest city. And they failed to gain control of Assad's chemical arsenal. Ferocious fighting failed to bring the big Syrian Air Force bases into rebel hands. Now, most of the fighting opposition to the Assad regime is ready to negotiate terms for a ceasefire as the opening gambit for a political settlement. They face their enemy standing firm as the unvanquished ruler of Syria and commander-in-chief of its armed forces at the cost of Syria 80-100,000 Syrian lives and a ravaged country. In so doing, Assad has cemented the Tehran-Damascus-Hizballah alliance. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's sphere of influence now stretches from the Persian Gulf up to the Mediterranean – his reward for the billion dollars worth of aid per month he poured into buttressing Assad. His other ally,

Hassan Nasrallah, whose Hizballah operatives fought shoulder to shoulder with Syrian troops, emerges as the strongman of Lebanon. Russian President Vladimir Putin, Assad's staunch backer in diplomacy, arms and moral support, congratulates himself for picking the winning side in Syria's civil war and, moreover, frustrating US and NATO designs to remove the Syrian ruler from power. Those are the winners. And the losers are the United States, the Gulf emirates and Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey. Barack Obama's vision of a democratic, liberal "Arab Spring" has collapsed. Al Qaeda is a ubiquitous presence as transitional governments struggle to their feet – or not - in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Israel finds a tighter than ever Syrian-Hizballah-Iranian noose closing around its borders as Tehran's nuclear weapons program marches on. Turkey gambled heavily on bringing about Assad's overthrow as the key to its bid for regional power– and missed.

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