



## **The Astana Process and the Future of Peaceful Settlement of the Syrian Crisis: A Status Note**

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The Syrian crisis is a stalemate on a regional chessboard where world powers, the US and Russia, and powerful regional players seem to have exhausted their options and have started looking beyond their choices. Bashar al Assad, with the military help of Russia and Iran has recovered much of his lost ground in terms of territory and military victories; the US-supported Kurdish groups have remained the most stable force in the eastern province of Hasakha; and, other opposition groups, such as Free Syrian Army, have lost significant ground including the loss of Aleppo. Now, the country has been declared largely free of ISIS, Russia has switched to political bargaining with its own forum of dialogue – Astana -- where the Russian-backed opposition and the regime are able to sit with the US and Turkey supported opposition groups. Meanwhile, Turkey has changed its game from advancing a regime change in Syria to weakening the Kurdish control on its southern borders with Syria where the US has just declared to create a 30,000-strong border force -- a move all other actors i.e. Russia, Turkey, Iran and the Assad regime have vehemently rejected. As the UN-brokered Geneva peace process has so far failed, Russia introduced its own peace process -- the Astana Dialogue -- to complement, , if not compete with, the Geneva process. Between these two peace processes, world powers and regional actors are struggling to secure guarantees for their respective interests in Syria by changing their approaches to the crisis. This paper discusses how the Astana Dialogue is rewriting the outcomes of the Syrian crisis.

The eighth round of Astana took place from 21-22 December 2017 after the parties to the conflict in Syria could not reach an agreement for a peaceful resolution to the war. The eighth round comes after Russian leader Vladimir Putin ordered a partial withdrawal of Russian forces.

In this meeting, Russia, Iran and Turkey -- the guarantor countries- issued a joint statement by focusing on the independence and sovereignty of Syria. In their final statement, the guarantor-states emphasised the protection of Syria's sovereignty, and welcomed progress in the implementation of the memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in Syria. The Russian, Turkish and Iranian presidents welcomed the achievements made in the fight against terrorism in Syria, particularly the defeat of ISIL and imminent liberation of all the Syrian territory from ISIL. They reaffirmed their determination to continue cooperation in order to ultimately eliminate DAESH/ISIL, Nusra Front and other terrorist entities as designated by the UN Security Council and to prevent the relocation of international terrorists to other countries and regions. They reaffirmed their joint determination to continue coordinated efforts to ensure that the progress in reduction of violence is irreversible.

The three guarantors resolved to closely interact on a regular basis to support preparation for and convening of the Syrian national dialogue congress in Sochi on 29-30 January 2018 with the participation of all segments of the Syrian society and called on the representatives of the Syrian Government and the opposition that are committed to the sovereignty, independence, unity, territorial integrity and non-fractional character of Syria to actively cooperate. To this end, the three countries will hold a special preparation meeting in Sochi before the congress, on 19-20 January 2018.

The three presidents also decided on, but did not identify, the congress participants who will outline their own vision of Syria's future on behalf of various opposition groups residing inside and outside Syria. The Syrian government has confirmed its participation in the congress, but opposition groups are yet to announce their readiness. According to the final statement, the three leaders also agreed to establish a working group on the release of detainees and cooperate on mine clearance in the conflict-torn country. The step on detainees was welcomed by Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria.

The eighth round of Astana talks follows the seventh held in Moscow on 22 November, where the three presidents discussed the progress and future of the Astana peace process brokered by Russia and Turkey in the aftermath of the Aleppo crisis in December 2016. In their joint statement, they agreed to “assist the Syrians in restoring unity of the country, and achieving a political solution of the crisis through an inclusive, free, fair and transparent Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process leading to a constitution enjoying the support of the Syrian people and free and fair elections with the participation of all eligible Syrians under appropriate UN supervision.”<sup>i</sup>

They emphasized that the creation of the de-escalation areas (Map 1)<sup>ii</sup> established under the Astana process in Syria have been quite efficient and greatly helped to reduce violence, alleviate the humanitarian suffering, curb the flow of refugees, and start working to provide conditions for the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons. They acknowledged that the “Astana format” and its achievements have become an effective instrument for contributing to peace and stability in Syria. They decided to continue their coordinated efforts to ensure that the progress in reduction of violence is irreversible.

The heads of state reaffirmed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and emphasized that under no circumstances should the creation of the above-mentioned de-escalation areas and a political initiative to solve the Syrian crisis undermine the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. They expressed support for a broad intra-Syrian dialogue involving representatives of all segments of society towards finding a peaceful solution. They called on the representatives of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition that are committed to the sovereignty, independence, unity, territorial integrity and non-fractional character of the Syrian state to participate constructively in the Syrian national dialogue congress in Sochi in near future. They agreed to actively contribute to the success of the Congress. Iran, Russia and Turkey will consult and agree on participants to the Congress. The presidents expressed the hope that the progress achieved in resolving the Syrian crisis through the cooperation of Iran, Russia and Turkey would have a positive effect on the overall situation in the region, and reduce the risk of an ethnic and sectarian divide.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Important Points of the Seventh Round Talks**

Kazakhstan became a mutually acceptable facilitator of the Astana Dialogue for all stakeholders primarily because it discreetly mediated between Turkey and Russia after Turkey had shot down a Russian jet for allegedly crossing Turkish airspace. Turkish construction companies have invested in several projects to the value of US\$21 billion which binds both countries with business and diplomatic ties.<sup>iv</sup> The Kazakh authorities are worried over the return of nearly 300 Kazakh fighters who had travelled to Syria to fight for Islamic State and other terrorist groups; and, they want to keep an eye on their return.<sup>v</sup> Kazakhstan has increased its international diplomacy to diversify its relations beyond its earlier Soviet ambit so that it can balance between Russia and other powerful countries. Kazakhstan's emergence as an acceptable mediator for world conflicts is an added value that Kazakhstan is banking upon to increase its international diplomatic outreach. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Kazakh President has maintained a personal rapport with both Russian President Putin and the Turkish President Erdogan, which helped him to find common ground between the two countries. The Astana Dialogue emerged as a forum which can force different stakeholders -- like Iran-controlled militants, Turkey-backed opposition groups and Russians with their influence over the Syrian regime -- to offer necessary concessions for a sustainable peace. But the Syrian crisis is one of the most complex crises which has plagued the West Asian region and has involved multiple players to see their side win the game. The ability of Kazak diplomacy to deliver peace depends on how much the Kazakh government can act independently of Russian and Iranian influence who actually have mandated Kazakhstan to take up the initiative on their behalf.

The Astana dialogue is said to have overshadowed the Geneva Peace process in which the parties have often disagreed and came out with no conclusive agreements. The Astana dialogue has drawn up a roadmap for Syria's political transition and peace process that can lead to normalising the security situation. There are six major points on which the three leaders have agreed:

1. Peace and stability in that country, and preserving its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

2. Cooperation in order to completely destroy ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other extremist groups.
3. Strengthening the ceasefire and sustainable functioning of de-escalation zones.
4. Increasing the level of trust between the parties to the conflict.
5. To step up inclusive intra-Syrian dialogue on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and announcement of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress with the participation of representatives of all sections of the Syrian population
6. The Congress will discuss Syria's future and create conditions for developing Syria's new constitution, define the parameters of future statehood, and, based on that, hold elections under UN oversight.

In this context, the statements made by the presidents of Iran and Turkey have clearly shown a degree of flexibility in their approaches to resolving the crisis. The Iranian side sees the threat of terrorism mainly in the forces that threatens the survival of the Assad regime while the Turkish side underlines the threat it faces from an assertive Syrian-Kurdish autonomous regions which aspire to become an independent state stretching from Syria's eastern north to the western city of Afrin. The Russian statement, however clearly maintains a degree of ambiguity over the Syrian-Kurdish "threat" and its future, though it completely endorses the unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

It is easy to understand how difficult it is for the three leaders to find a win-win situation in a country where their interests often clash. The US policy in Syria, unilaterally empowering and arming the Syrian Kurdish militants, whom Turkey accuses of planning to create an independent state, has become a common point to advance the policy of a territorially united Syria. Despite the differences in their agenda, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been able to come together to find a solution for Syria as well as for themselves. President Putin in his statement underlined that the efforts of Russia, Iran and Turkey helped to prevent the "disintegration of Syria" and its capture by international terrorists and to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. The role played by Russia seems to have taken a shift from just "defending and protecting the Assad regime", as the pro-Assad negotiators often claim. The Russians speak of an exit strategy from the crisis and find a sustainable peace for the country, without sticking to any condition.

After seven rounds of meetings in Astana, apart from a nationwide ceasefire, four de-escalation zones have been established which include:<sup>vi</sup>

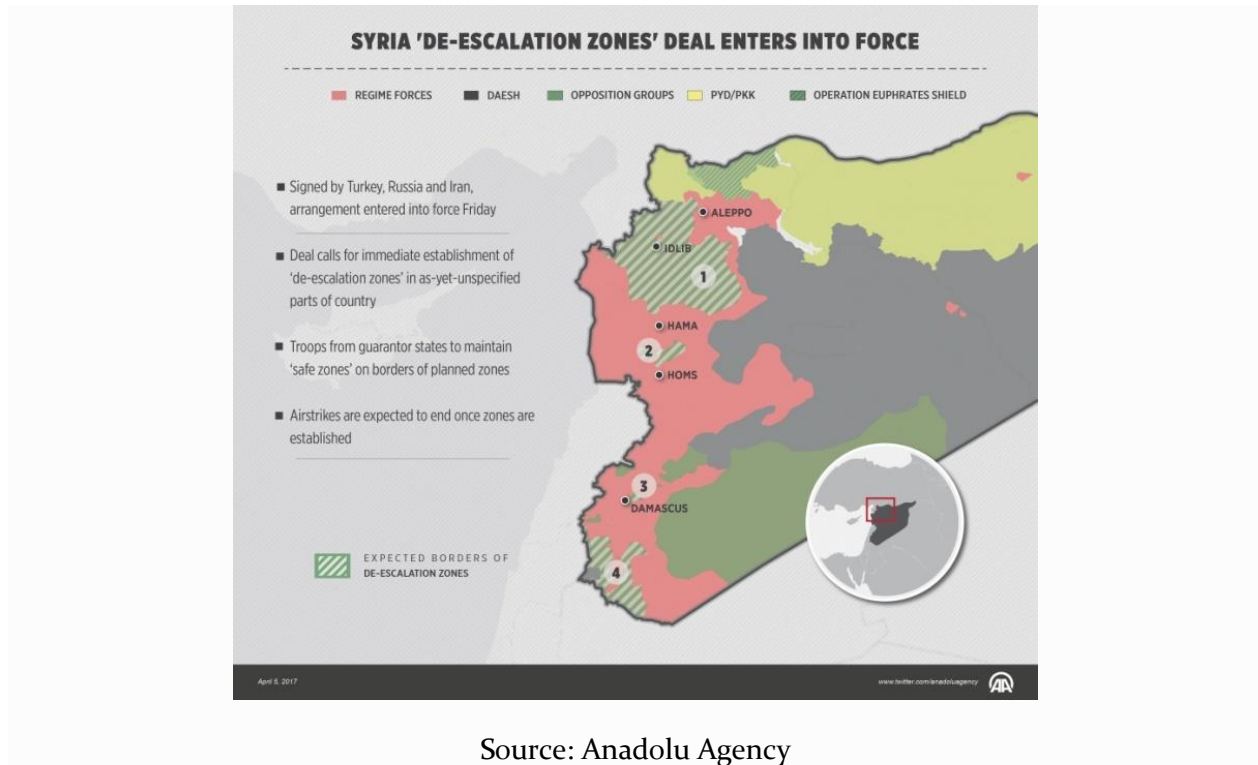
**Zone 1:** Idlib province, as well as northeastern areas of Latakia province, western areas of Aleppo province and northern areas of Hama province.

**Zone 2:** The Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs province.

**Zone 3:** Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside.

**Zone 4:** The southern areas along the border with Jordan that includes parts of Deraa and Quneitra provinces

### De-escalation Zones as agreed by the Astana Dialogue



The four areas have seen a significant decline in violence, though some violence still continues in Zone 3. These zones have assigned Turkey and Iran the role of guarantors, who on behalf of militant groups are pressing for a long-term ceasefire. The success of the process, since it was declared in July 2017, has created new hope of a political outcome to the crisis.

### Genesis of the Astana Peace Process

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, initially offered Astana as a venue that could be used for the progress of ceasefire talks between opposing sides in Syria. The contribution of the Astana talks to resolving the conflict through diplomatic dialogue has been recognised by the UN and many world leaders. The Astana process is complementary to the Geneva one, with both aiming to work in tandem to ensure a peaceful and stable solution to the conflict in Syria.

The Astana process came into existence when Russia and Turkey in December 2016 agreed to Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, as a new venue for carrying on the Syria peace talks. On 20 December 2016, the foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey, and Russia agreed, pursuant to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, to hold Syria peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan. On 23 December 2016, a Syrian opposition delegation and government delegation converged in Astana

for indirect talks titled the International Meeting on Syrian Settlement, sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran.

The Astana meeting was arranged with the intention of strengthening the ceasefire signed on December 30, 2016. These were indirect talks between Syrian armed rebel factions and representatives of the Syrian government, supported by Russia, Iran and Turkey, with UN delegation acting as intermediary, and as an observer. These talks are credited with being the first to include both the Syrian government and an armed opposition. During the other six rounds<sup>vii</sup> of Astana peace talks, the main points that were decided were the following –In the more recent dialogues, the three parties have agreed on measures which have facilitated a more credible peace process, than that of the Geneva process.

### **Guarantor States Mechanism**

As Russia, Turkey and Iran have been involved with completely different sets of interests in Syria, their agreement on creating a tripartite mechanism proved to be the only effective mechanism which could compel the warring parties to respect the outcomes of the dialogue. The guarantor states (Russia, Iran and Turkey) have held eight meetings in which they have agreed on certain issues and areas, mainly as follow:

- To establish a tripartite mechanism to monitor the ceasefire in Syria;
- To hold meetings on the Astana platform on specific issues.
- To establish a Joint Monitoring Group, the results of which would be reported to the UN;
- To be guided by the provisions of UNSC resolution 2254 (2015);

### **Geneva and the UN as the main reference**

The Astana dialogue avoided any confrontation or duplication of the already going on UN monitored Geneva process. In most of the dialogues, the three parties have explicitly agreed to respect the Geneva process:

- Call upon the conflicting parties, representatives of the Syrian opposition and civil society to use emerging favorable conditions to step up efforts to give impetus to the intra-Syrian dialogue and advance the UN-led political process in Geneva as well as other initiatives, and to do so on an urgent basis; (14-15 September 2017)

### **Political Dialogue and Syrian National Congress**

- Express their conviction that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict and that it can only be solved through a political process based on the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 2254 in its entirety; (23-24 January 2017)

- Support launching talks between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the armed opposition groups in Astana on January 23-24, 2017
- Emphasize that they view the upcoming Syrian national dialogue congress as an initiative aimed at giving momentum to the negotiation process under UN auspices in Geneva and facilitating an intra-Syrian agreement based on mutual consent; (21-22 December 2017)

### **Political Transition**

The guarantor states have discussed political transition in detail and have agreed on many clauses related to the transition which include:

- A provision on a working group on the exchange of detained and imprisoned persons
- Prospects for establishing a working group on the Syrian Constitution
- They also expressed their conviction that the solution of the Syrian conflict is possible only through political means.
- The guarantor states emphasized the crucial role of the Astana Process that facilitates the Geneva peace negotiations.
- Called upon the conflicting parties, representatives of the Syrian opposition and civil society to use emerging favorable conditions to step up efforts to give impetus to the intra-Syrian dialogue and advance the UN-led political process in Geneva as well as other initiatives, and to do so on an urgent basis;
- Express joint determination to continue coordinated efforts to ensure that the progress in reduction of violence is irreversible. They underscore the necessity to take urgent and active international steps in order to assist the Syrians in restoring unity of the country, and achieving a political solution to the crisis in accordance with the provisions of UNSC resolution 2254 (2015) through an inclusive, free, fair and transparent Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process leading to a constitution enjoying the support of the Syrian people and free and fair elections with the participation of all eligible Syrians under appropriate UN supervision; ((21-22 December 2017)

### **Terrorism**

The three parties have also reduced their differences over terrorist groups and have agreed to separate the genuine opposition armed groups from that of terrorist groups. In its initial statements, the Russian foreign ministry on behalf of three states had identified seven armed groups that were identified to be engaged in peace process. They also agreed:

- To reiterate their determination to fight jointly against ISIL/DAESH and Al-Nusra and to separate from them the armed opposition groups; (23-24 January 2017)
- On creating a single map indicating positions of terrorist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat an-Nusra and locations of the armed opposition groups.

- On provision of a working group on the exchange of detained and imprisoned persons and on prospects for establishing a working group on Syrian Constitution.
- To emphasise on the elimination of ISIS and other terrorist groups active in Syria; also, emphasise on the need amongst conflicting parties to focus on confidence-building measures.

### **De-escalation Territories and Humanitarian Assistance**

- They signed a Memorandum on the creation of four de-escalation zones in Idlib, Homs, eastern Ghouta, as well as Deraa and Al-Quneitra to put a prompt end to violence, improve the humanitarian situation and create favourable conditions to advance political settlement of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.
- The guarantor states confirmed their determination to strengthen the ceasefire regime and the inadmissibility of violating it, as well as their determination to promote confidence-building between the parties to the conflict.
- Allocation of the de-escalation control forces of the three guarantors on the basis of the maps agreed upon in Ankara on 8 September 2017 and in accordance with the Terms of Reference for deployment of de-escalation control forces prepared by the Joint Working Group on de-escalation on a temporary basis in the security zone in the de-escalation areas.
- Forming of Joint Iranian-Russian-Turkish Coordination Center aimed at coordinating activities of de-escalation control forces in the de-escalation areas.
- They also addressed the issue of de-mining the UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria.

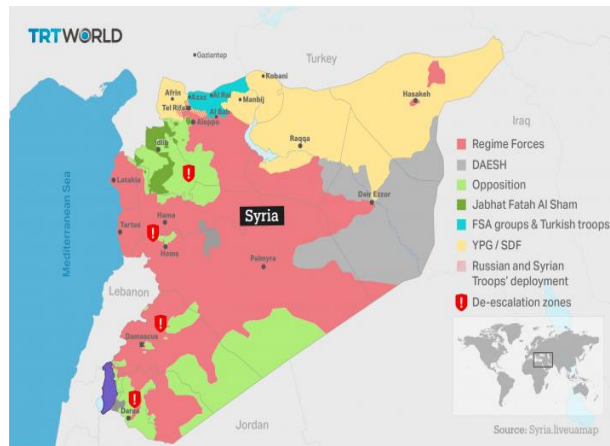
### **Territorial integrity and Sovereignty of Syria**

The Delegations of the guarantor states – Iran, Russia and Turkey – adopted a Joint Statement, reaffirming their commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

- The guarantor states reaffirmed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic;
- The guarantor states decisions are guided by the provisions of the UNSC Resolution 2254 (2015);
- Emphasized that under no circumstances the creation of the above-mentioned de-escalation areas undermine the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.



## Who controls what in Syria after the Astana Dialogue



Source: TRT World TV

Since 2011<sup>viii</sup>, many plans and agreements were elaborated upon in order to end the Syrian conflict, and the ensemble of these initiatives is often referred to as the Syrian peace process. In 2012, the United Nations supported the P5-headed Geneva I Conference. The outcome of that conference was the production of a communiqué that detailed the necessary elements to resolve the political conflict in Syria. The document, however, failed to identify the parties that should be included in a prospective transitional government, since there are numerous opposition movements that carry different beliefs and motivations.

Meanwhile, in January 2013, President Assad offered his own peace plan that included a national reconciliation conference, a new government and a new constitution, which the opposition rejected.

### The Geneva Process

In January 2014, the UN held the Geneva II Conference on Syria, where it tried to bring both the government of Assad and some of the most prominent opposition groups (the Syrian National Coalition) together to the negotiating table. In this peace process, both sides were involved but it could not come up with any concrete resolutions as President Assad refused to accept the demands of the opposition. The next round of talks took place in Vienna. This was after the Russian military started helping the Assad government. The key participants were the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, countries with essentially different visions regarding the future of Assad and the treatment of opposition groups, especially the Kurds. However, in this meeting there was no representation from the Syrian side. France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, China, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, United Arab Emirates and representatives of the European Union and the United Nations were also present. At the end of this conference, the participants agreed that the resolution of the Syrian conflict should be diplomatic, respecting the people and the integrity of Syria, and that the Islamic State should be defeated. The UN was invited to mediate talks between the government and the Syrian opposition in order to guarantee the success of a political transition plan. The names of the particular group or individuals representing the opposition group were not known. On November 14, the second round of

negotiations took place in Vienna, with the participation of the same countries and organizations present on October 30, and representatives of the Arab League. The group became known as the “International Support Group for Syria” (ISSG).

The countries talked about the urgency to end the destruction of Syrian infrastructure as well as to mitigate the suffering of the Syrian people. They all agreed that the establishment of a ceasefire in the country should be the immediate priority. Finally, it was also decided that elections focusing on the draft of a new constitution would be held within 18 months in Syria, and that January 1, 2016 would be the deadline for the beginning of peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups. The criteria for the opposition group to be represented in the talks was that it must be from the broadest possible spectrum of opposition groups, who will be chosen by the Syrian people and will represent their goals. The ISSG also emphasised on finding a common ground between the Syrian government and the opposition parties for drafting a new constitution.

On February 2016, Geneva III took place. The establishment of a ceasefire as primary goal was one of the objectives, apart from establishing a transition government in Syria in April 2016 and defeating of the Islamic State. In this meeting, the opposition parties came under the banner of High Negotiations Committee (HNC). Though the outcome was not successful, a few days after this meeting, the ISSG, the US and Russia established a Task Force for the ceasefire. The ceasefire was maintained and in April 2016, parliamentary elections were held which the HNC declared as illegitimate<sup>ix</sup>. President Assad won the election.

The third round of the Geneva III took place in April which met with failure. The violence continued despite the ceasefire. In this meeting, the Kurdish representatives were excluded.

In February 2017, the fourth round of Geneva IV started. The Geneva IV centred on four sets of technical talks: accountable governance; the constitution; elections; and, counter-terrorism and security governance.<sup>x</sup> In February 2017, Geneva V took place where the warring sides agreed to negotiations based on UNSC 2254, which lays the foundation for a political transition based on accountable governance, a new constitution and UN-supervised elections within 18 months. In May, Geneva VI takes place and the talks failed without any discussions on the agenda which was agreed upon during the previous talks. The seventh round of Geneva talks held in July, too, met with failure. The latest took place in November after the Astana process. The eighth round also met with failure as the Assad government walked away from the talks due to the opposition’s demands on the role of Assad during the transition.

### **Saudi Arabia’s Role**

Apart from the Astana and Geneva talks, Saudi Arabia has also facilitated the peace process. The first round of peace talks took place in Riyadh where the opposition party met in December 2015 to discuss the fate of Syria and also to formulate their agenda to talk to the Assad government. The agenda of the meetings under the Riyadh banner was to find a common viewpoint among the opposition on the issue of transition of powers in Syria and the removal of President Assad. The Riyadh talks were to bring together all the opposition groups to speak in one voice and present a

common vision for Syria's future. During the 2015 meeting, the group called for President Assad to step down at the start of a negotiated “transitional period”, which will produce a “democratic mechanism through a pluralistic regime that represents all sectors of the Syrian people”.<sup>xi</sup> In the second meeting that took place in November 2017, the group adopted the ‘Riyadh 2-Communique’ which was rejected by the Syrian government because of the continuation of the demand of President Assad’s removal and his exclusion from governing Syria during a transitional period.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Different Opposition Groups**

As the war between opposition and the regime devolved into an intra-opposition terror groups’ fight for territorial control, the Syrian opposition weakened and lost its ability to stand united and consistent in its agenda against the regime. As of now, there are groups that are influenced by Russia called as “Moscow Platform” which do not want the issue of Bashar al Assad’s future to be part of any discussion at all, while the High Negotiation Council and other groups are advocating a clear time frame for Assad to go. The Cairo Platform was created in 2014 by some groups close to the Syrian government and former minister Jihad Makdisi, who wanted Assad to stay for a limited part of the transition time.<sup>xiii</sup> The group maintained that the United Nations and the Geneva Process should be respected.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Syrian National Council which has been the only group able to maintain its unity as the highest and most inclusive group for Syria’s opposition group has difficult relations with the “Cairo Platform”. The vice-president of the SNC, Hisham Marwah, had accused the Cairo conference 20 May 2015, of excluding some opposition groups. He maintained that the opposition party must not give up the principles of the Syrian revolution and unite over the demand for the removal of President Assad.<sup>xv</sup> As a result, there is more common ground between Moscow and Cairo Platforms while the High Negotiation Council and SNC remain mostly isolated since the Russian military intervention began. But on the battlefield, the Russian and other pro-Assad factions have a serious problem of credibility. In recent months, when relations between Saudi Arabia and Egypt were not going very well on the issue of Egypt’s low profile military participation in the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia once again called its own conference of Syrian opposition leaders.

### **Trends Emerging**

The various peace talks which are taking place on different platforms have the same goal i.e. finding a solution for a peaceful transition to the Syrian crisis. The bone of contention amongst all the parties is regarding the role of President Assad, which does not allow conflicting parties to come under the same roof and resolve the crisis. External powers including the regional ones have tried to work together as, for instance, the coming together of Iran and Turkey, who, till recently, were in opposite camps. Apart from Ankara and Tehran, Russia and Saudi Arabia, too, have shown signs of coming together.

It seems that Iran and Turkey are tired of the continued violence and increasing military and humanitarian liabilities from the crisis. Iran, on its part, is viewed with deep suspicion by Sunni regional powers who see Iran only as a Shia power advancing its “expansionist sectarian influence”<sup>xvi</sup> through the Shia militias. The sectarianisation of the Syrian crisis is very deep and

undeniable, as was the involvement of Iran-supported militias in preventing the Assad regime from an imminent collapse in 2015. Sunni powers and rebel groups accuse Iran and its militias of carrying out a planned demographic change so that the political process goes in favour of Assad.<sup>xvii</sup> Iran on its part, pointed to the “presence of foreign troops on the territory of Syria without the permission of its legitimate Government” and Saudi-Salafi extremist forces.<sup>xviii</sup> The war of narratives between the regional powers continues unabated, mostly against Iran though. Tehran is also facing the ire of its citizens at home, as evident from the recent protests in Iran. The Iranians showed their discontentment and anger regarding Iran’s support to the Hezbollah group (which is active in Syria) and the country’s support to Syria.

The Syrian crisis has made opposing camps, such as Russia and Saudi Arabia, come together. Initially, Saudi Arabia asserted that Assad would be removed from power by force despite Russia's strong military support for him. However, the win in Aleppo changed the tone of Riyadh. Since then, Saudi Arabia has stopped demanding President Assad’s removal from office and has stopped criticising the role of the Russian military in Syria. The change in attitude is evident to the extent where Russia and Saudi Arabia have decided to work together for unifying the opposition<sup>xix</sup>.

Saudi Arabia’s King paid a state visit to Russia for the first time in seven decades. Since then, the Russian discourse on the Syrian crisis can be seen becoming more conciliatory and in favour of a negotiated outcome, rather than a complete take-over of Syria by military victory as claimed by Bashar al Assad and his Iran-supported militant allies.<sup>xx</sup>

### **Russia’s Success in Syria**

Russia has emerged as a strong power in the Syrian crisis. It was able to project its power militarily, politically, economically (despite its western-led sanctions) and diplomatically. From the time of its launch of missiles from the Caspian Sea till its securing the second military base in Syria after Tartus and the recent claim of destroying the IS, Russia was able to manage the global and regional powers such as the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to try and reach an agreement for ending the civil war in Syria as well as the elimination of terrorist groups within the country. Russia was able to bring into its camp Turkey, which was accused of supporting Jabhat al Nusra, the terrorist group. The interesting part in this relationship between Russia and Turkey is that Turkey holds its trump card of NATO along with its dominance in the Black Sea, which Ankara can use against Moscow. At the same time, Moscow too can create trouble for Turkey in the form of support to the Kurds and Greek Cyprus.

The de-escalation zones which were able to be formed with the help of Jordan, US and Israel also bring out the perspective of the strong relationship shared between Russia and Iran. That is because Moscow has been able to pacify countries like Jordan and Israel which do not share a good relationship with Tehran.

The way the Astana Dialogue has been initiated and advanced is clearly a Russian strategy to bring in other stakeholders with whom Russia is aspiring to expand its reach in the Middle East. Just ahead of the seventh round of Astana talks, the Russian president went through hectic

diplomatic outreach globally by speaking with the US President Donald Trump, King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz Al , the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the Emir of the State of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Just a day before the seventh round of the Astana summit, Syrian President Assad arrived in Sochi on an unannounced visit to talk with Putin in which President Assad is reported to have stated commitment to the principles of settling the political crisis by peaceful means and carrying out a constitutional reform, as well as free, UN-supervised elections xxi (both presidential and parliamentary xxii).<sup>xxiii</sup> The statement from Assad was seen as an endorsement of Putin's plans in Syria by all the parties including President Assad. He said that he is ready to work with anyone who wants peace and conflict resolution.<sup>xxiv</sup> Bashar al Assad, according to the published transcripts of the talk, tried to keep the fight against "terrorism" on the top of the agenda and warned that ignoring this fact might could mean problems in the future. However, President Putin focused on the requirement of political settlement<sup>xxv</sup>.

Russia will try to safeguard its national interests not only in the short-term but also in the long-term for which it will try to balance all the parties involved in the crisis -- both the internal parties as well as the regional powers involved in the conflict. Recently, Russia and Syria extended the lease on the military bases in Tartus and Kheimim Air Base till 2092<sup>xxvi</sup>. Russia will try to keep the lease and will come to a negotiated position regarding the future of Syria. It has said in the past that it supports the Syrian people's decision including in the political transition, which might mean a Syria without President Assad. In future, the Kremlin will keep its bilateral relationship intact with the government of Syria, regardless of whosoever is in power.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

It is not surprising that Saudi Arabia once again tried to revive its role in Syria and gathered the entire Syrian opposition in Riyadh on dates coinciding with the Astana Summit. There is a clear message from the Riyadh dialogue, which is that Saudi Arabia is ready to go with Russian plans if its concerns are taken care of. As the key leaders of Syrian opposition, Riyadh Hijab and others announced their resignation ahead of the Riyadh dialogue, Russian Foreign Minister Seregi Lavrov was the first to welcome the announcement calling the move as the "retreat of radically minded opposition figures from playing the main role". The Russian foreign minister said that Russia "will support the efforts made by Saudi Arabia in this respect."<sup>xxvii</sup> Russian diplomacy, as it tries to involve more and more Sunni powers in the final outcome, has put Iran under pressure to convince its militias to go in for a political process.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The November talks between Russia, Iran and Turkey had given hope for a consensus amongst all the conflicting parties. That is because it reached a consensus on the political and socio-economic aspects of Syria including the conducting of free and fair election, establishment of a Syrian National Congress, peace and stability in Syria as envisaged by UNSCR 2254, elimination of terrorism and the return of refugees.

It is important to strive for a resolution of the conflict in Syria. The cost of rebuilding is going to be enormous and it will need international cooperation and the support of every stakeholder.

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Disclaimer: The views are that of the authors and not of the Council.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Joint statement by Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey”, *President of Russia*, November 22, 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5256> (Accessed on 23 November 2017).

<sup>ii</sup>In the eastern Ghouta, in certain parts in the north of Homs province, in Idlib province and certain parts of the neighboring Latakia, Hama and Aleppo provinces and also in certain parts of southern Syria. <https://www.rt.com/news/403428-deescalation-zone-syria-russia/>

<sup>iii</sup>Joint statement by Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey”, *President of Russia*, op.cit.

<sup>iv</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey, Relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkey-and-kazakhstan.en.mfa>

<sup>v</sup>Samuel Ramani, 24 December 2016, What Does Kazakhstan Have at Stake in Syria?, *The Diplomat* <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/what-does-kazakhstan-have-at-stake-in-syria/>

<sup>vi</sup>“Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained” ,*Al Jazeera*, 4 July 2017 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html>

<sup>vii</sup>In the February 2017, Astana talks the representatives from the Syrian government and armed Syrian opposition groups, with the United Nations, the US and Jordan as observers were included. “Factsheet on the Astana Process”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Kazakhstan*, <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kratkaa-spravka-po-astaninskomu-processu> (Accessed on December 15, 2017).

<sup>viii</sup>Douglas de Quadros Rocha, Isabela Souza Julio and Patrícia Graeff Machry, “Peace Talks on the Syrian Conflict”, *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)*, v.1 n.1, July 2016. <https://www.ufrgs.br/nerint/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Boletim-v1n1-peacetalkssyria.pdf> (Accessed on January 9, 2017).

<sup>ix</sup>“Syria’s HNC against letting Kurdish PYD side with opposition at Geneva talks”, *Ekurd. Net*, March 21, 2016. <http://ekurd.net/syria-hnc-against-kurdish-talks-2016-03-21> (Accessed on January 12, 2017).

<sup>x</sup>The Geneva process has never graduated beyond indirect talks, in which regime and opposition delegations meet with de Mistura’s team, not with each other. Sam Heller, “Geneva Peace Talks Won’t Solve Syria—So Why Have Them?” *TCF*, June 30, 2017. <https://tcf.org/content/report/geneva-peace-talks-wont-solve-syria/> (Accessed on January 6, 2018).

<sup>xi</sup>Hussein Ibis, “Riyadh was an important step for the Syrian crisis”, *The National*, December 12, 2015. <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/riyadh-was-an-important-step-for-the-syrian-crisis-1.99251> (Accessed on January 9, 2017).

<sup>xii</sup>“Top Syrian negotiator rejects Riyadh-2 communiqué”, *The Iran Project*, December 1, 2017. <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2017/12/01/top-syrian-negotiator-rejects-riyadh-2-communiqué/> (Accessed on January 9, 2017).

<sup>xiii</sup> Bassel Oudat, Opposition contradictions in Syria, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/22295.aspx>

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<sup>xiv</sup> Syria's opposition, divided and varied, to get a new face 22 November 2017  
<https://apnews.com/1537eedc82a047838f415c0757f9c563>

<sup>xv</sup> Syrian opposition group boycotts Cairo peace talks, Al Araby  
<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/5/20/syrian-opposition-group-boycotts-cairo-peace-talks>

<sup>xvi</sup> Afshon Ostovar, 30 November 2016, Carnegie Endowment  
<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288>

<sup>xvii</sup>The Guardian 14 September 2017 Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>.

<sup>xviii</sup> Joint statement by Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey”, *President of Russia*, op.cit.

<sup>xix</sup>“Russia working with Saudi Arabia to unify Syrian opposition: Lavrov”, *Reuters*, November 24, 2017.  
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<sup>xx</sup>MK Bhadrakumar, *Asia Times* 22 August 2017, Assad lays down new rules in winner-takes-all Syrian future  
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<sup>xxi</sup>The Syrian Diaspora (who will be eligible) will also be able to participate in the election.

<sup>xxii</sup>“Telephone conversation with US President Donald Trump”, *President of Russia*, November 21, 2017.  
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<sup>xxiii</sup>“Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made a working visit to Russia”, *President of Russia*, November 20, 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56135> (Accessed on November 23, 2017).

<sup>xxiv</sup>Ibid.

<sup>xxv</sup>Ibid.

<sup>xxvi</sup>“Putin Asks Lawmakers to Expand Russia's Navy Presence in Syria”, *The Moscow Times*, December 13, 2017. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-asks-lawmakers-to-expand-russias-navy-presence-in-syria-59928> (Accessed on January 12, 2018).

<sup>xxvii</sup>Russia says retreat of Syrian opposition figures good for peace 21 November  
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<sup>xxviii</sup>Hamid Reza Azizi, 6 December 2017 Al Monitor Russia's multilayered Syrian diplomacy worries Iran  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/iran-russia-sochi-summit-mistrust-astana-geneva-syria.html>