

• Author: [Leonid Isaev](#)

## [Is peace prevailing after Astana?](#)



The Syrian regime, along with representatives of several rebel groups, resumed negotiations over the settlement of the Syrian conflict in Kazakhstan's capital on January 23-24, after a break of over six months. Following the previous meeting, held in Geneva last April, attempts aimed at reaching a political settlement reached a standstill.

It would be premature to assess the results of the meeting in Astana since it was *a priori* intended to be an intermediary step which was evidenced by the low-level of the representatives to attend the talks (the Russian delegation, for example, was headed by Special Presidential Envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev) as well as the absence of a number of opposition groups. Hence, objectives set out by participants and organizers of the meeting were realistic and not over-ambitious.

Sergey Lavrov formulated the main goal of the Astana meeting in the run-up to talks: extending the cease-fire agreement reached at the very end of last year. Representatives of the Free Syrian Army confirmed their approval, however, they also demanded access to humanitarian aid and the release of political prisoners. Officials in Damascus were not keen on honoring the cease-fire which was repeatedly violated in Eastern Ghouta and Wadi Barada both before the meeting in Astana and while talks were taking place, allegedly due to humanitarian reasons; partly the reason behind Ahrar al-Sham's refusal to go to Kazakhstan.

In line with the above, the main goal of the meeting in Astana can be defined as creating conditions for the resumption of the Geneva negotiation process in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 which

was reflected in the joint statement issued by the representatives of Turkey, Iran and Russia at the meeting's conclusion in Kazakhstan. In this sense, the Astana process is little more than an attempt to accelerate the process of political settlement under the supervision of the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, since it is precisely the Geneva format - and not the Astana one - which has a chance of leading to agreements being adopted throughout the entire Syrian territory and not merely in some of its regions.

Reduction of conflict potential in Syria currently plays into the hands of all three countries which act as guarantors of the cease-fire: Iran, Turkey and Russia. Of all the external parties involved in the conflict, Moscow, Tehran and Ankara are the most active. Nevertheless, advantages gained during their military presence in Syria need to be converted into political dividends as soon as possible. Otherwise, they are at risk of being offset by ever-increasing costs incurred by each of these three parties. This, in particular, serves as an explanation for this alliance of convenience established in late 2016 between countries which, otherwise, can hardly be said to be allies. Moreover, the views they hold concerning post-conflict Syria are radically different.

However, the problem lies in the fact that the troika's efforts are currently proving insufficient to ensure a nationwide cease-fire, let alone resolve the Syrian crisis. In fact, the north-western area of Syria is the only region in which the mechanism proposed by the troika for controlling the truce could feasibly work. In this region, all three parties are in good shape to apply the necessary pressure to their allies "on the ground", which could result in a relative lull. Despite some violations, the cease-fire has generally been observed on the whole since late December of last year. However, the key question is whether this truce will be a lasting one.

So far, actions carried out under the trilateral format, which succeeded the Russian-American dialogue as part of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), evoke a sense of *déjà vu*. Moscow and Washington were co-chairs in the ISSG. The United States and Russia had already resorted to similar measures while preparing for the Geneva talks in order to create more favorable conditions for the negotiation process almost a year ago. Just as now, Russo-U.S. efforts did bring about a reduction in conflict potential in Syria. However, the main problem lies in the conflicting parties' inability to arrive at a political solution which suits all parties.

Truth be told, this problem was never going to be resolved in Astana as the initiators of the talks held in Astana did not manage to encourage direct negotiations between the parties, not to mention the fact that the number of participants paled in comparison to the number that participated in Geneva last spring. As a result, the role of Staffan de Mistura, who met each delegation in isolation on the sidelines in Geneva, was assumed by the troika in Astana which acted as an intermediary in communications between the delegations of Bashar Jaafari and Mohammed Alloush. The fact that neither the opposition nor the regime was ready to adopt a more flexible approach, having departed from ultimatum-like, bi-lateral demands, proved less than advantageous also.

If the troika is to bring about a long-term cease-fire, it has to do so in the nearest future. Apparently, the Syrian opposition and Sergey Lavrov are holding a meeting in Moscow with this aim in mind on January 27. Discussions regarding the establishment of a Syrian constitution, as proposed by Russia, are on the agenda. The draft proposal was handed over to representatives of the opposition in Astana by Alexander Lavrentyev in a bid to make the talks in Geneva appear, at least to some extent, constructive. This is most likely the reason why Geneva talks were postponed from February 8<sup>th</sup> to the end of the month which was announced by Sergey Lavrov. Geneva carries enormous reputational weight for Russia since if it goes without any results, Russia will no longer have the chance to attribute that the "destructive" role of the United States or other "partners", as Russia did a few times before. The stakes in Geneva are tremendously high while the results are unpredictable, that is why Moscow is being more cautious and contacting those who it considered to be terrorists not so long ago.

The question as to whether Russia will be perceived both by the regime and the opposition as a reliable intermediary - the role that Russia aspires to - remains unanswered. Officials in Damascus and Tehran increasingly observe engagement between Moscow and militant groups with utmost vigilance. The reputation of the Russian leadership, in the eyes of the rebels following last year's bombing of Aleppo, which seriously undermined Russia's credibility, lies in tatters.

Finally, the success of the Astana process and the trilateral initiative overall will only be possible should new external participants be attracted to help guide developments in Syria: at least the US, countries of the Persian

Gulf and Jordan. Currently, plans for the future of Syria and the conclusion of any agreements on Syria without the involvement of the Kurds, the Southern Front etc. seem entirely unfeasible and cannot be implemented in practice. Hence, the Russia-Iran-Turkey format is a good start for political dialogue surrounding Syria and can serve as a backdrop for progress towards conflict settlement. However, whether the parties can build on this local success remains to be seen given that they are forever at loggerheads.

Significantly different stances are held steadfastly by the troika countries, both with respect to the issue of settlement of the Syrian conflict and attracting new players to the negotiation process. Besides, one should not harbor any illusions that either internal or external players will be prepared to join the trilateral initiative under the terms set out by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Moscow, Tehran and Erdogan's Turkey have traditionally exhibited a reluctance to play by universal rules as well as a desire to enforce their own moral and legal standards which may prove to be a major stumbling block on the road towards reaching a political compromise.

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