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[The Spoils of Peace Broking in Syria](#)



Many experts on the conflict in Syria, and a number of its participants, have questioned the legitimacy of Russia-backed peace talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana. Nevertheless, there has been some progress in this format. The latest talks have led to the [signing of another memorandum](#), mostly to do with the establishment of “de-escalation zones” in Syria. In these areas, according to the memorandum, fighting between government and opposition forces will be restricted.

So far, it seems it could be partially successful, at least temporarily, but only within limited territorial confines. However, the failure of a number of previous ceasefire deals provides reasons to be more pessimistic. Those deals were more ambitious and comprehensive, but were all short lived. Russia, the United States, Iran and Turkey have all heralded some ceasefire deal or other over the course of the conflict, but all have so far failed to halt the bloodshed.

The latest problem lies less in a lack of sincerity of the guarantors of the ceasefire — Iran, Turkey and Russia — but rather local forces who are resistant to the influence of external actors. Are the Syrians themselves prepared to sign the agreements brought about by further Geneva or Astana peace-talks? The answer?... Apparently not... at least as long as both warring parties can balance the interests of their external patrons, and as long as they do not suffer from a shortage of resources. Therefore, agreements vulnerable to being sabotaged by parties directly involved in the conflict, as we have already seen several times.

The last incident included a chemical attack on the Idlib city of Khan-Shaykhun, which had such a powerful resonance in the global community that it led to a missile attack on the Syrian Shayrat airbase by the United States. It subsequently became clear that the ceasefire initiated by the “troika” — of Russia, Turkey and Iran in 2017 — was no longer being observed. Therefore, it was necessary to launch a new de-escalation mechanism as soon as possible so that the respective Astana process and the Geneva peace process were not stalled again, which would have been unacceptable from the Russian point of view.

Today, Russia is the player which has the greatest interest in a political settlement of the Syrian conflict. The deadlock of the Geneva and Astana ceasefire agreements is fraught with serious reputational loss for Russia. After the ultimate failure of the Russian-American initiative to cease hostilities as part of the International Syria Support Group (ISGG) in September 2016, Moscow took advantage of the White House transition period in the United States, assumed the initiative and cited its “rules of the game” in Syria. This was the intention behind the tripartite plan of December 2016, and the subsequent Astana and Geneva processes.

Having resumed the negotiation process on Syria despite great difficulty, Moscow harbors a greater interest in its success than any of the other external actors. The Geneva and Astana deals are laden with colossal image potential for Russia: in the case that they fail, the Russian leadership will be left with zero opportunity to attribute it to the destructive role of the US or other external partners, as it has done previously. The stakes for the Kremlin are high, while the results remain unpredictable. Therefore, Moscow has to look for other ways of de-escalating the Syrian conflict.

The necessity to develop a new way of stopping hostilities was given even greater impetus due to regional considerations. A chemical weapon attack in Khan-Shaykhun could potentially aggravate the conflict in Idlib province as a whole, which would be extremely undesirable from both the Russian and Turkish points of view, especially against the backdrop of revived relations between President Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdogan.

Judging by their statements, the Syrian leadership has long been unwilling to seek a compromise with the opposition; government forces have been calling for a reinstatement of full control over Syria through military means. After the capture of Aleppo, the Ba’athist regime sought to effect further military expansion into the neighboring province of Idlib. However, given the inability of the Syrian army to gain ground throughout the whole country, it is impossible for Damascus to achieve this aim without military assistance from allies. First and foremost, Russia.

Moscow is well aware that Ba’athists’ ambitions are unrealistic. Besides, their fulfillment will require an increased Russian military involvement which is inevitably fraught with political risks that are largely unnecessary. Any Russian participation in the military campaign in Idlib might mean that losses offset the territorial advantages gained.

From the point of view of Ankara, Idlib is the last Turkish stronghold in Syria. The loss of this province to the Syrian government would symbolize a shameful defeat for Turkey in the context of the Syrian conflict. This virtually guarantees that the Turkish authorities will stop at nothing in order to retain control over the northwestern part of Syria. Erdogan’s victory in the recent referendum effectively ensures the Turkish leadership room to pursue a more active foreign policy.

The desire to avoid the next upsurge of violence and minimize the risk of a direct clash in Syria forced the initiators of the Astana meeting — primarily Turkey and Russia - to work out a de-escalation zones agreement. This was effectively an attempt to divide the country into spheres of influence “on the ground”, as devised by the troika back in early 2017. Thus, Moscow, Ankara and Teheran identified four zones most prone to conflict (Idlib province, northern Homs province, the eastern Ghouta area as well as Daraa and Quneitra provinces). The likelihood of clashes between regime forces and the opposition remains the highest there and there exists a significant risk of further violations by both sides.

Therefore, the two zones (Idlib province as well as Daraa and Quneitra provinces) are used to ensure interests of external powers, guaranteeing their presence in Syria *de jure*. The other two zones (the eastern Ghouta area and northern Homs province) are used to contain and protect major opposition enclaves on the territory controlled by the Syrian government. The inhabitants of these enclaves constitute integral parts of both the Astana and Geneva negotiation processes.

However, despite the importance of this latest tripartite initiative, the impact of its implementation has, so far, been up for debate. To begin with, the document is extremely vague. It is unclear whether the joint working group will manage to agree on all details before the deadline set out in the communiqué of June 4th. The conflicting objectives pursued by the guarantor countries in the Syrian conflict could lead to stalling on some of these agreements, which could impinge on their interests. Secondly, the parties will have to develop a mechanism for ensuring the ceasefire is observed in de-escalation zones. This is a particularly pressing issue in the case of Idlib province. The ceasefire regime, along with other humanitarian and social initiatives laid down in the agreement, will have to be observed there whilst combat with the Tahrir al-Sham group (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) rages on. Thirdly, the agreement ignores a number of locations - for example, in the provinces of Damascus and Homs (this zone is referred to as "certain parts in the north of Homs province") - rocked by recurrent clashes between regime and opposition forces in recent months. Moreover, the non-inclusion of Tishrin and ar-Rastan in the de-escalation zones may jeopardize the implementation of the Astana strategy entirely.

Most importantly, it still remains unclear whether the rival sides themselves are interested in implementing the Astana agreement. Only three stakeholders signed the document: Iran, Russia, and Turkey; it does not bear the signatures of representatives of Syria. This means that the probability of an eventual sabotage of the Astana agreement is still high.

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