



## **POLICY BRIEF**

# **Between Astana and Geneva: The outlook of conflicting agendas in the Syrian crisis**

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Moscow is trying to take advantage of the opposition's declining position on the ground after the loss of Aleppo, and of the regime and Iran's desire to pursue a military solution [Reuters]

### **Abstract**

Since the beginning of the Astana process, Moscow seems to be in a race against time to establish the foundations of a solution in Syria before arriving in Geneva: first, by reforming the opposition's delegation to the negotiations, an effort Moscow has been working on ever since the military intervention in Syria began, and second, by redrawing the solution's main parameters, which Moscow exerted great effort towards during marathon negotiations conducted with the former US Secretary of State, John Kerry. Through these negotiations, Moscow has been able to change the rules at Geneva by prioritising an agreement to change the constitution, followed by the formation of a non-sectarian representative government, and then calling for presidential elections with Assad's participation, so 'the Syrian people can decide his fate'.

### **Introduction**

As it nears completion of its sixth year, the Syrian crisis has entered a new phase after a series of developments on the ground in 2016, most notably the opposition's loss of its main stronghold in Aleppo. Russia took advantage of these developments to establish a new political trajectory, beginning in Astana, and is now competing with the Geneva process, attempting to at least limit its results while seeking to impose a settlement that emerges from what it sees as the required solution and outcome for Syria. While Moscow prepared for a new round of Astana talks on 15 and 16 February 2017, the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, was preparing for a new round of negotiations in the

framework of the Geneva process, started on 23 February. And so, what do the chances for a solution to the Syrian crisis look like between Astana and Geneva, and what are the most prominent regional and international positions?

### **Astana's trajectory: Russia's investment**

After the fall of the city of Aleppo, which represented a major objective of the coalition of forces supporting the regime since Russian military intervention in September 2015, Moscow called for a meeting in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on 23 and 24 January 2017, in order to stabilise the ceasefire between Russia and the Syrian oppositional factions that was agreed upon in Ankara with Turkish mediation on 30 December 2016. After driving the opposition forces out of Aleppo, Russia hastened to hold a tripartite meeting in Moscow that included Turkey and Iran. The meeting between the ministers of foreign affairs and defence from the three states aimed to agree on the principles of a solution in Syria after Russia estimated that the opposition is now in a position to extract significant concessions. In the last days of Barack Obama's administration, Russia also tried to take advantage of the near-complete absence of the United States from efforts to reach a settlement to the Syrian crisis in order to rearrange the situation in Syria politically and on the ground, before the new US administration returns its attention. The trilateral meeting, held on 20 December 2016, ended up with the Moscow Declaration: an agreement on extending the ceasefire in Aleppo to cover all Syrian territories except for regions controlled by the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (previously Al-Nusra Front). Indeed, the meeting stressed the absence of a military solution for the crisis in Syria and called for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution No. 2254, issued in December 2015.

Due to Moscow's limited invitation to armed opposition factions to attend the Astana meeting, the Supreme Commission for Negotiations did not come. However, some members of the National Coalition, the main opposition body, attended as advisers to factions in the delegation. Moscow justified what happened, since the conference would not discuss political issues but would be limited to technical and military issues aimed at stabilising the ceasefire and developing mechanisms to monitor violations, according to the Ankara agreement. Moscow tried through Turkey and Jordan to persuade the largest possible number of armed opposition factions to attend the meeting. Furthermore, the factions who signed the Ankara agreement, and the factions of the Southern Front with which IS has had an undeclared truce since the beginning of 2016, constituted a united delegation to Astana, presided over by their leader Mohammed Alloush from Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam).

Nonetheless, Astana was not just a technical meeting to find ways to implement the ceasefire in the form that Russia prefers, for the regime's delegation was political par excellence and included the majority of its members in the Geneva talks with Bashar Jaafari in the forefront. Moreover, during the meeting, Moscow put forward a draft Syrian constitution, expressing that Russian experts were interested in drafting it, and asked for the opinion of the armed opposition factions in this regard. A highlight of the Russian constitutional proposal was to transfer some of the president's powers to the parliament. According to Article 44 of the proposal, "the people's association (parliament) holds the following functions: declaration of war and peace issues, the removal of the president, the appointment of members of the Supreme Constitutional Court, and the appointment and dismissal of the president of the central bank."

The meeting ended with a tripartite declaration in which the opposition expressed reservation on the basis that Iran is one of the guarantors of the ceasefire agreement, and which approved the establishment of a mechanism by the three countries to monitor the truce. Two days after the end of the meeting in Astana, Moscow invited figures from multiple Syrian opposition parties to meet Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow to inform them of the meeting's outcome and solicit their opinions on the Syrian constitutional project. Obviously, the invitation was a clear attempt to reshuffle the deck, and continued to marginalise the role of the Supreme Commission for Negotiations. For instance, commission chairman Riyadh Hijab and leaders of the National Coalition of Opposition Groups were invited, from among twenty-five Syrian opposition groups.

However, with its call for a new meeting in Astana on 15 and 16 February 2017, referred to as Astana II by the media, preceding the Geneva IV negotiations called for by the UN envoy to Syria on 23 February, Moscow is clearly establishing a new process that could represent a substitute for Geneva in the event that the latter fails to pass a resolution.

## **Geneva outcomes**

The negotiations, which were based on the Geneva Declaration (30 June 2012) and have held two rounds so far, failed to reach a solution to the Syrian crisis: The first, in early 2014, and the second, in early 2016, achieved little progress, due to, on the one hand, the commitment of the regime and its allies to negotiating under fire as a way to impose their will on the negotiating table, and on the other hand, the opposition's insistence that a ceasefire is a prerequisite and a necessary condition to begin any serious negotiating process, not only as a measure of goodwill but because it cannot negotiate while the

shelling of civilians continues by the forces of the regime and its allies. Indeed, the reason for the failure of the ceasefire agreements during the two occasions mentioned (Geneva II and Geneva III) relates to the inability of the Russian and US sides to overcome their disputes. In particular, Vienna II (2014) failed to make progress because of worsening Russian–US relations after the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Geneva III (2016), which came after Russian military intervention in Syria, failed because Washington refused to coordinate security and military operations with Russia in Syria, a condition set by Moscow for a truce between the regime and the opposition, and to centre efforts on striking IS; therefore the ceasefires of February and September 2016 broke down.

Nevertheless, the 2012 Geneva Declaration represented a springboard for the political process which called for the formation of a government commission or transitional body comprised of the regime, the opposition and independent groups, who would all enjoy executive powers in leading the transition period. This course, nevertheless, was severely shaken as a result of Russian military intervention in Syria starting on 30 September 2015. Furthermore, Russia's intervention laid the ground for a political trajectory that Moscow had proposed in Vienna through which Russia could reap the results of its military intervention in Syria. In Vienna, Moscow tried to change the foundations of the Geneva Declaration, and substitute the proposal of a 'transitional governing body' by introducing a 'non-sectarian representative governmental body', where Assad remains a part of the transition period. Therefore, a Russian-US agreement, known as the Vienna Agreement, was concluded on 14 November 2015, and a roadmap was provided to resolve the Syrian crisis, which was included in Security Council Resolution No. 2254 on 18 December 2015. The text emphasises the necessity of attaining a ceasefire and forming a non-sectarian representative government to amend the constitution and conduct elections within eighteen months under United Nations auspices. Although the roadmap was included in the introduction, the new resolution represented a departure from the spirit of the 2012 Geneva Declaration and Resolution 2118 of 2013 which called for the formation of a transitional body with full executive powers to lead a transitional period out of the crisis.

### **Astana and Geneva: Competition or integration?**

With Russian-US efforts failing to produce an agreement to implement Security Council Resolution 2254, despite intensive meetings held by the two countries' ministers of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov and John Kerry, in 2016, Russia abandoned the idea of joint action with Washington and began leaning towards a regional rapprochement to

resolve the conflict, taking advantage of the Obama administration's fragility in the last months of its tenure. The Pentagon's rejection of the agreement reached by Secretary Kerry in Moscow on 9 September 2016 weakened the US position. Moreover, President Obama had supported military and security coordination between the Russian and US armies in Syria against IS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, as a step towards the implementation of a ceasefire and cooperation in solving the Syrian crisis.

Russian President Vladimir Putin benefited from the altered regional environment, which consisted mainly in the changing Turkish position as a result of growing doubts concerning the goals of US support for Kurdish forces in northern Syria, particularly the People's Protection Units belonging to Kurdish Democratic Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Ankara considers a terrorist group threatening its unity and national security. At the same time, Ankara began to redefine its interests in Syria and its effective relations with regional and international forces on the Syrian issue in the light of situations resulting from the failed coup attempt, which threatened to topple the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in mid-July 2016. This has led to the end of the crisis in Turkish-Russian relations, which began after Russian military intervention in Syria and reached its peak when Turkish fighter jets brought down a Russian plane near the Turkish-Syrian border in late November 2015.

This rapprochement set the trajectory for Astana in which Turkey is responsible for guaranteeing the participation of opposition factions in return for Russia guaranteeing the regime's participation and its commitment to the ceasefire conditions. Iran has been included to prevent it from being a disruption, after many reservations in Turkish-Russian bilateral agreements regarding the Syrian crisis, including the agreement on removing the opposition from Aleppo, the ceasefire agreement, and Russia's recognition of opposition factions that Tehran considers to be 'terrorists'.

Since the beginning of the Astana process, Moscow seems to be in a race against time to determine the foundations of a solution in Syria before arriving in Geneva: first, by reforming the opposition's delegation to the negotiations, which is an effort Moscow has been working on ever since the military intervention in Syria, and second, by redrawing the main parameters of the solution, which Moscow has exerted great effort towards during marathon negotiations conducted with the former US secretary of state, John Kerry. Through these negotiations, Moscow has been able to change the rules at Geneva by prioritising an agreement on changing the constitution, followed by the formation of a non-sectarian representative government, and then calling for presidential elections by which Syrian people can decide the fate of Assad; however, prior to this, some of his

authority should be removed and given to the government emerging from the parliament.

To ensure this agenda's adoption, Moscow focused its effort on breaking the Supreme Commission for Negotiations' monopoly on representing the opposition, because of its commitment to a solution based on the Geneva Declaration in relation to the formation of a transitional body with full executive powers and the departure of Assad. Therefore, Moscow has resumed efforts to restructure the opposition delegation to the Geneva IV negotiations in order to include the largest possible number of its allies in the platforms of Cairo, Moscow, Hmeimim and others. To thwart this opportunity, the Supreme Commission for Negotiations held a meeting in Riyadh on 10 and 11 February to reformulate its negotiation delegation and include a member from Moscow and another from Cairo. However, the issue of the formation of the delegation remains a matter of heated debate in light of demands to give platforms and equal representation to the Supreme Commission as well as Moscow's progress in attempting to elevate armed factions to take the lead in negotiations for the resolution given that they are the actual forces on the ground and the decision makers with respect to the cessation of hostilities.

However, the opposition-supporting countries do not appear to have left the agenda blank for Russia to make a unilateral decision on the solution for Syria, or to allow the Astana talks to replace the Geneva process. A clear response came from the Friends of Syria who held a meeting in Bonn on the side lines of the G20 ministerial meeting on 16 February 2017. In this regard, ten Arab and western countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, Turkey, Germany, Britain and France, expressed full support for the Geneva negotiations and rejected any attempts to replace them or launch any political solution away from them or outside the auspices of the United Nations and its decisions. This is a clear message to Russia that any attempt to impose an individual solution on Syria will be confronted. In addition, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stressed the rejection of any military cooperation with Russia, as long as it does not distance themselves from the position of Damascus, which considers all opposition factions to be terrorists, including those who attended Astana.

## **Fragile gamble**

Moscow is trying to take advantage of the opposition's declining position on the ground after the loss of Aleppo, and of the regime and Iran's desire to pursue a military solution. It is also trying to benefit from the Trump administration's inclination to focus on the war on IS and the shift in Turkish priorities to put pressure on the opposition to accept the

proposed rapprochement to solve the problem prior to arriving in Geneva (the constitution – and a national unity government – elections). At the same time, Moscow is trying to establish an independent trajectory in Astana just in case it fails to impose its conditions for a solution in Geneva. This can be fulfilled through gathering the largest possible number of political and military opposition forces as well as the regime and its supporting militias to its side, taking advantage of its good relationship with both Turkey and Iran to create a solution acceptable to Syria, which it has promoted since the beginning of the crisis. However, Russian efforts might not necessarily achieve Moscow's objectives despite the significant investments made by Moscow, considering the clear difficulty facing the Trump's administration in achieving rapprochement with it on Syria and other issues and the determination of the forces supporting the opposition to adhere to the Geneva process, which holds the view that if a change does not happen in the Russian agreement on a real change in the structure of the regime in Damascus, there will not be a way out of the crisis. Moreover, Russia should be prepared to deal with the opposition's shift to adopting a strategy of long-term conflict, which will not be in anyone's interest, if it continues to adopt the position of the Syrian regime and its approach to resolving the conflict.

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