

How Iran-Russia-Turkey Dialogue Can Help Solve Syria Crisis

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

Mutually agreed points that emerged from the conference:

1. Respect for the territorial integrity of Syria.

For Iran and Russia, this is an essential point. Turkey sees the danger of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in Syria as an existential threat.

The territorial integrity of Syria is high priority for Ankara.

Considerations: This agreement is an important point, but there is nothing new in terms of the respective positions of the parties. This step is just a confirmation of a certain convergence of interests between the three countries on this issue.



2. Fighting terrorism in Syria.

In this case, we must distinguish what is meant by the definition of terrorism. All three countries agree with the United Nations resolution that labels Daesh and the Nusra Front as terrorist groups. The misunderstanding stems from the hidden support of Turkey to organizations like Daesh and Nusra Front, as well as other minor groups that are equally dangerous. Iran and Russia are well aware of this and are trying to implement a strategy to avert or diminish the support Ankara gives to its terrorist proxy forces.

The operation in northern Syria directed by Ankara called 'Euphrates Shield' employs thousands of troops belonging to Islamist-radical organizations that Russia, Syria and Iran consider to be terrorist groups.

Considerations: Joint statements, especially on a diplomatic level, speaking about combating terrorism (in the case of Ankara, this definition does not include all the Syrian opposition) are pro forma and have little practical value. No nation openly advocates for terrorism.

Compared with the operation in northern Syria, Moscow and Tehran's divergences appeared evident with respect to Ankara's position. Even more difficult to comprehend is the distinction made by Ankara between terrorists and rebels.

3. End of hostilities across Syrian territory.

Iran and Russia have for months, even years now, asked the Turks, Saudis and Americans to indicate which terrorist groups among the factions that make up the Syrian opposition are to be considered 'moderate' and which extremist – a trivial distinction between legitimate and illegitimate fighters. Moscow and Tehran's position has not changed over the past eighteen months. However, the Turks, Americans and Saudis do not intend to give up on the terrorists; this much appears clear. Otherwise the war would have already been over.

Considerations: Agreeing on the cessation of hostilities is another example of pure diplomatic forms of expression. No progress will be made as long as Ankara continues to support terrorism in Syria.

Differences that emerged from the press conference:

1. The role of Hezbollah

The Turkish foreign minister said that one of the main conditions for ending hostilities in Syria is ending support for Hezbollah on Syrian territory, seeking to equate the Lebanese organization with radical Islamists involved in Operation Euphrates Shield. Such attempts at equivalence has accentuated the differences between the Turks on the one hand and the Iranians and Russians on the other.

Zarif, the Iranian minister, commenting on the words of the Turkish colleague, responded with a terse, «There are differences on this subject». Interestingly, Lavrov, referring to Hezbollah, commented on the words of Muallem in a positive tone.

Considerations: The position of Ankara in this case is buttressed by the money that Qatar largely uses to finance Erdogan. The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, with its visceral hatred for Hezbollah, makes itself felt even in such meetings. It is unlikely that Ankara and Tehran will be able to reconcile their respective points of view over this delicate issue.

2. The invitation to Syria.

Lavrov noted that Iran, Russia and Hezbollah were invited to Syria, in contrast to Turkey and the international coalition, who operate without authorization from Damascus.

The Turkish foreign minister reiterated that the operation in Syria is legitimate so long as it is aimed at combating Daesh. It is the same excuse used by the international coalition, by the media and by politicians to justify the blatant violation of Syria's sovereignty.

Muallem reiterated the intention of Ankara to return the occupied territories reconquered from Daesh once the operation in Syria is over. It is a statement that will be put to the test at the appropriate time, and about which there are many doubts.

The serious concerns of Moscow and Tehran over the Turkish operation in northern Syria have pushed Ankara to declare in advance that it will not remain in permanent possession of the invaded territory.

Considerations: Ankara does not intend to ask Damascus directly to cooperate, so it feels authorized to enter Syrian territory without the necessary invitation. It looks like some kind

of agreement exists whereby Damascus does not attack Turkish troops in the north of Syria in exchange for Ankara renouncing its «Assad Must Go» policy. This is unwritten binding agreement that will exist as long as Turkey keeps open a channel of dialogue with its Russian and Iranian colleagues.

Conclusions

The dialogue between these three nations has only probably marginally affected the aspects discussed in the press conference. Undoubtedly, following the liberation of Aleppo, the need arose, especially for Moscow, to obviate any desperate moves from the defeated party.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United States have no intention of seeking a dialogue or changing their rhetoric. Probably as a result of Trump, this trio will have less influence in the coming months. Ankara appears to be the country most involved in the Syrian war at this point, and a dialogue with Syria, Iran and Russia is necessary and its continuation has been agreed to by all parties in spite of all the great differences that remain.

The possibility of a grand accord appears highly unlikely, and this does not appear to be the purpose of these meetings. Such high-level encounters involving defense ministers seem to be more of a clearinghouse between allied nations (Russia and Iran on behalf of Syria) and nations opposing Damascus (Turkey – the stand-in for Qatar and the United States?), designed to avoid the risk of further escalation in Syria.

The liberation of Aleppo raises important questions. How will Turkey react when Russians and Syrians begin to push toward Idlib or Al Bab? And in the future, when they will focus their aim on Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor?

These are legitimate questions and doubts.

Seeing as how the Iranians, and especially the Russians, operate, it is more than normal to have a place to discuss and be able to confront the counterparties. The main goal is always to avoid accidents or worse. This, however, does not mean that agreements are going to come about in the near future. Dialogue is one thing; cooperation is another. It is important to be aware of this in order not to overestimate the outcomes of these trilateral meetings.

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