

Middle East Peacemaking Is No Longer “Made in America”. Defeat of ISIS-Daesh

The U.S. lost the military gamble in Syria; now it appears to be ceding its diplomatic edge, too.

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Featured image: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (L), Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) shake hands prior to the Syria talks in Sochi. (Source: CreartiveCommons/www.kremlin.ru)

As 2017 comes to a close, the warring parties in Syria are moving towards reconciliation—but the U.S. is not among them.

The Islamic State is all but defeated, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies are now closing in on the few remaining pockets occupied by other extremists, and Iranians, Russians, and Turks are mapping out the peace to come.

Then there's America. Donald Trump may have hinted at changes up his sleeve, but he's treading the same tired path as his predecessor on Syria.

Determined to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a means to weaken Iran and re-establish U.S. regional hegemony, Barack Obama's White House placed its bets on two pathways to this goal: 1) a military strategy to wrest control over Syria from the regime, and 2) a UN-sponsored and U.S.-backed mediation in Geneva to transition Assad out.

Washington lost its military gamble when the Russian air force entered the battle in September 2015, providing both game-changing air cover and international clout to Assad's efforts.

So the U.S. turned its hand to resuscitating a limp Geneva peace process that might have delivered a Syrian political settlement sans Assad.

Instead, two years on, the tables have turned in this sphere, too. Today, it is the Iranians, Turks, and Russians leading reconciliation efforts in Syria through a process established in Astana and continued last week in Sochi—not Geneva. The three states have transformed the ground war by isolating key extremists, carving out ceasefire zones, and negotiating deals to keep the peace.

To nobody's surprise, the Americans are neither part of this new initiative, nor have they offered any constructive counters. Meanwhile, the UN's Geneva framework, after eight

rounds of talks, has *not once* been able to bring the two Syrian sides face-to-face at the Big Table.

To illustrate, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, who leads these talks, now says things like this with a straight face:

“We have started very close proximity parallel meetings. In fact, I have been shuttling between two rooms at a distance of five meters from each other.”

In short, the U.S.’s Syrian efforts have hit a brick wall, while new regional and international power brokers have stepped in to pick up the slack.

Geneva: A process designed to fail

Just one week ago, with great media fanfare, we were promised a fresh start and new twists in Syria. For the first time since the Geneva I conference launched in June 2012, we were told the opposition was “unified” and there were no “pre-conditions” that might hold up talks.

Those expectations were shattered almost immediately when various Syrian opposition members went [off-message](#) and insisted that [“Assad must go”](#) at some point during a future transition period. Unified they were not. And the Syrian government didn’t hide their disgust. They arrived a day late and scurried back to Damascus just as quickly.

And here is why Geneva negotiations will never, ever get off the ground.

Firstly, the “Syrian opposition” [do not actually represent](#) “the Syrian people.” Most of these individuals have been selected by foreign governments—until recently, mainly by U.S. allies in Riyadh, Doha, Ankara—to do their bidding in Geneva, and have been “elected” by no more than a few dozen other Syrians in foreign capitals.

UN envoy de Mistura didn’t bother to hide that fact last week when he [thanked the Saudis](#) for facilitating “the establishment of a unified opposition delegation.”

The UN-led process—like the U.S. administration—has created conditions that exclude Syria’s more independent and nationalistic domestic opposition from negotiations. These are people who have largely rejected foreign intervention and the militarization of the conflict, rail against Western-imposed sanctions, and signal actual readiness to talk to Assad’s government about the reforms they desire.

The Russians and Iranians have kept open channels to these individuals and groups, and many of them have beaten a path to Moscow over the years to strike compromises and seek solutions. A few even made the cut, for the first time, at this eighth round of Geneva talks.

Secondly, the Syrian opposition have lost the war—victors decide the peace, not the vanquished. The team sitting in Geneva seems oblivious to the fact that the Syrian government and its allies have now gained an almost-irreversible military advantage on the battlefield. These are not two parties on equal footing—and no great-power mentors in the world can change that fact.

Assad's government has said on numerous occasions that it is willing to sit with any Syrian who comes without preconditions and negotiates in good faith. Years of "reconciliations" on the ground between the government, local citizens, NGOs, friendly foreign state-guarantors, and rebel fighters lend a proven track record to those claims. This is the format for future negotiations—it is a tested, homegrown Syrian solution, not one made-in-America-or-Riyadh.

"Ceasefires" struck in Astana

The breakthrough came in late 2016. Turkey, the main adversary state through which weapons and jihadists flowed into Syria, made a U-turn on its Syria strategy, driven by U.S. military support for Kurdish fighters in northern Syria, which Ankara views as a national security threat. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan began a tactical engagement with Russia and Iran, and pulled Qatar and its respective Syrian rebel allies along with him. These moves tipped the balance on the battlefield, allowing the SAA and its allies to liberate Aleppo (a turning point in the war) and launch their ultimately successful campaign against ISIS.

Shortly afterward, delegations consisting of the Syrian government and a dozen opposition rebel factions convened in Astana, Kazakhstan, for indirect talks sponsored by Turkey, Iran, and Russia.

By early May, the three countries had signed a memorandum to establish four ["de-escalation zones"](#) in rebel-occupied areas in Syria. The zones cover key hotspots in northern Homs, southern Syria, eastern Ghouta, and Idlib province, and are renewable at six-month intervals. While some armed groups have rejected the concept, the de-escalation zones have largely succeeded at halting hostilities and, importantly, have helped create separation between extremists and rebels willing to participate in ceasefires.

Furthermore, for the more than two million people believed to reside in these zones, the Astana process also guarantees humanitarian and medical access, the return of displaced persons to their towns and homes, the reconstruction of vital infrastructure, and other benefits.

In July, the U.S. and Jordan joined Russia to broker the details of the southern Syrian de-escalation zone, with a joint command established in Jordan. And in September, Iran, Russia, and Turkey agreed to implement the fourth and final de-escalation zone in Idlib, a stronghold of the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra terrorist group.

In short, within eight months, four key areas of Syria demilitarized under the watch of three countries: Turkey, a major supporter of Syrian opposition militants, and Iran and Russia, both close allies of the Syrian government.

A "political solution" in Sochi next?

Ceasefires are, incidentally, one of the [two primary objectives](#) of the Geneva process. They are the military part of a Syrian solution.

The other objective is the political settlement of the Syrian conflict, envisioned by Geneva's architects as the establishment of a transitional government that would generate a revised constitution, prepare elections, and the like.

Last week, on the eve of Geneva-8, the three Astana sponsors convened in Sochi after an

unexpected meeting there between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin that appeared to signal an official Syrian approval for what came next.

In a [joint statement](#), the presidents of Iran, Russia, and Turkey called for a “Syrian National Dialogue Congress” to be held in Sochi in the near future, consisting of the Syrian government and “the opposition that are committed to the sovereignty, independence, unity, territorial integrity and non-fractional character of the Syrian state.”

While they were careful to point out that the initiative is intended to “complement” Geneva, not act as an “alternative,” the statement also made clear that “Iran, Russia and Turkey will consult and agree on participants of the Congress.”

Will this be another rubber-stamped opposition directed by foreign mentors? An informed source says no, “any Syrian who does not exclude him or herself can participate.”

It is highly likely that hardliners and extremists will exclude themselves from the Sochi talks—they have consistently rejected direct interactions with the Syrian government and will never accept a future with Assad at the helm. Instead, Sochi is likely to draw interest from a larger cross-section of Syrian society closer to the views of Syria’s [traditional domestic opposition](#), who were never given a chance in Geneva.

In the end, it is altogether conceivable that a final Syrian political solution will look very similar to the [reforms](#) Assad offered up in 2011 and 2012. His proposals were never given the time or space to mature and were, at the time, rejected outright by foreign governments and their Syrian allies.

But most importantly, if Sochi can finish what Geneva could never start, we will be thrust into a genuine post-American era where alternative regional actors will be able to broker globally significant peace deals.

The resolution of a conflict of this magnitude largely outside the umbrella of a UN- or U.S.-led framework breaks with the assumption that major geopolitical solutions need be made-in-America.

The most common refrain in a disgruntled Middle East today is that “Americans don’t solve conflicts, they manage them.”

Trump this week forever dispelled the notion that America is an honest mediator in Middle East peace efforts when he unilaterally recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. It is not surprising that the [Saudis](#), [Jordanians](#), [Qataris](#), [Sudanese](#), [Egyptians](#), and others are now beating a path to Moscow for some fresh thinking.

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