

Prospects for Syrian Peace Are Looking Up

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After prolonged hibernation, the Astana Process on Syrian peace is kinetic, with the troika of 'guarantor' states – [Russia, Turkey and Iran – set to hold a round of talks in the Kazakh capital on November 28-29](#). Delegations of Syrian government and the opposition are also expected to attend. A renewed effort is commencing to create traction for the UN-sponsored negotiations in Geneva.

Much water has flown down the Euphrates since the 9th round of the Astana Process took place in May. Six months is a long time in politics – especially in Middle East politics. But, paradoxically, while Middle Eastern politics is in turmoil, the prospects for peace in Syria may have improved. The setting for tomorrow's meet – it's unclear at what level the event will take place – has become largely favorable. At least 10 major reasons can be attributed.

One, Syria is witnessing a period of relative calm. There has been no major fighting for months. Two, Syrian-Jordanian border had reopened and nothing of a feared flare-up happened in the Golan Heights. Three, the Russian-Turkish understanding on Idlib is holding. Four, Israel has been effectively 'defanged' (thanks to deployment of Russian S-300 ABM system to Syria). Five, Russia and Iran intend to retain their military footprints in Syria for a foreseeable future, while on the contrary, the US lacks the political will or the military capability to impact the strategic calculations of Moscow, Tehran, Damascus or Ankara.

Six, importantly, Turkey has become an implicit ally of Russia and Iran and is inching closer and closer to a political deal that leaves President Bashar Al-Assad in power. Seven, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are in the lead in shaping the Syria policy, with clear strategic goals and, even more so, the means to achieve them.



Tehran Summit on Syria, September 2018 (Source: Indian Punchline)

Eight, on the other hand, a growing determination on the part of Russia, Iran, and Turkey is discernible to freeze out the United States from any role in shaping Syria's geo-strategic future. Although the three countries would have tactical differences between them, broadly, Turkey will accommodate Russia and Iran so long as it has a free hand to check the Kurdish forces threatening its security. Significantly, the announcement on the rebooting of the Astana Process comes after the [visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Turkey on November 19](#).

Nine, the crisis in Turkish-American relations not only persists but may even deepen in the period ahead. Finally, the Trump administration's calculations that its re-imposition of

sanctions against Iran will either force Iran out of Syria or, better yet, produce a veritable collapse of the Iranian government are turning out to be a mere pipedream. In fact, the opposite has happened.

Iran is intensifying its coordination with Russia and Turkey, and is creating firewalls to protect its strategic gains in Syria. Again, it is clear by now that the US cannot count on the new government in Baghdad to act against Iranian interests.

On the other hand, the [dangerous situation that has arisen on Israel's border with Gaza](#) (which was precipitated entirely by Israeli hardliners) and the [ensuing mayhem in Israel's domestic politics](#) will seriously delimit Benjamin Netanyahu's energy and resources to act as 'spoiler' in Syria. Moscow has openly snubbed Netanyahu lately by refusing him to schedule his visit.

Similarly, the widening cracks in the US-Saudi alliance in the downstream of the Khashoggi murder all but means an overall Saudi disengagement from the Syrian conflict. The UAE has already begun mending fences with the Syrian government, which would only have been possible with Saudi approval. (See my blog [UAE, Saudi sense convergence with Syria.](#))

Suffice to say, the so-called Syrian opposition is finding itself rudderless. Their erstwhile mentors – US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE – have either reached a dead end or have turned to new priorities in their self-interests accepting the defeat in the Syrian conflict.

Meanwhile, the [appointment of Norwegian diplomat Geir Pederson as the UN Secretary-General's new special envoy for Syria](#) becomes a positive factor. Russia has warmly noted that "we know him as an experienced and unbiased diplomat." Pederson's predecessor Staffan de Mistura was widely perceived as a sidekick of the US. Clearly, the Astana Process is not wasting time by kickstarting the work on a Syrian settlement even as Pedersen moves in.

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