

The Astana Process: A Possible Solution to An Impossible Situation in Syria

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A significant event took place last week, but you wouldn't know it if you reside in North America or Europe.

This past Thursday, a three-page memorandum was signed in Astana, Kazakstan calling for the creation of four "De-escalation Zones" in Syria. This latest proposed peace deal is the latest product of the [Astana Process](#) chaired by three nations, Russia, Iran and Turkey, an effort designed to support the previous [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#).

This document is controversial to say the least, because it calls for the establishment of "islands of safety," which are analogous to Washington's previously called for 'Safe Zones.'

These four zones include the northwestern province of Idlib, the Al-Rastan Plain just north of the city of Homs, the area of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, and areas in the Daraa'a and Al Quneitra governorates of southern Syria.

According to the memorandum, the aim of the agreement is to try and end violent clashes between militant groups and the Syrian and Russian military, and to "provide the conditions for the safe, voluntary return of refugees." The ceasefire will also be used to send humanitarian relief and essential supplies to the four de-escalation zones.

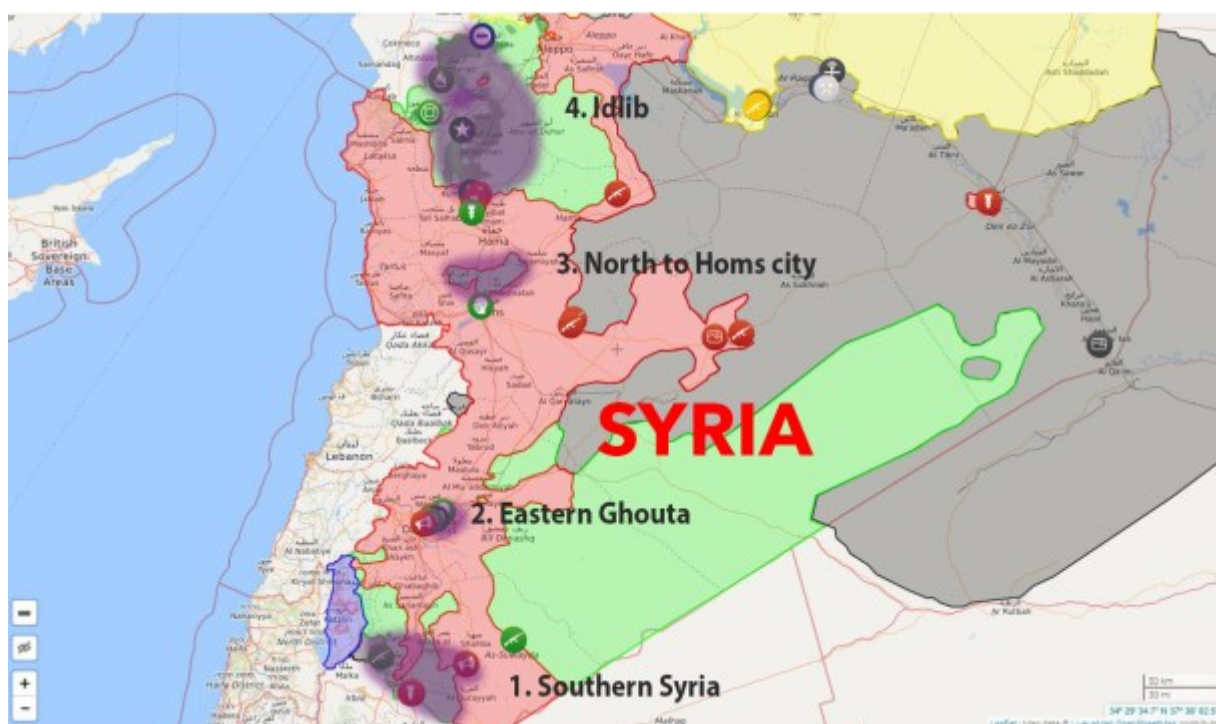


IMAGE: The four Astana De-escalation Zones, or 'Safe Zones.'

Critics of the plan are opposing it for a number of reasons, including Iran's involvement and accusations that it will lead to an eventual break-up of the current Syrian nation state.

For the Syrian government and its people, the ceasefire could provide a much-needed window to restore some essential services and repairs to damaged infrastructure. The Syrian government in Damascus is supporting the proposal, although previously President Bashar al-Assad had referred to parts of the plan as "not a realistic idea at all."

The issue of international peace keeping forces on the ground to enforce ceasefires has not met with benevolence from everyone either. This week, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem dismissed the idea of having international forces in Syria to patrol the four 'safe zones.' Al-Moallem told AP,

"There will be no presence by any international forces supervised by the United Nations." He added, "The Russian guarantor has clarified that there will be military police and observation centers."

Also in attendance at Astana was the UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura and somewhat surprisingly, the US also sent its Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs [Stuart Jones](#). According to RT International, the US decision to send Jones as an observer was preceded by a "very good" phone call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump. For the time being, the US has no choice but to acknowledge, albeit begrudgingly, the Astana Process. US officials have issued a statement which expresses 'guarded optimism' but falls short of endorsing the plan, mainly because of Iran's role as a signatory and military guarantor.

The agreement does not, however, cover any other contested areas where the Syrian government is fighting designated terrorist group Jabat al Nusra (al Qaeda in Syria), or ISIS.

There is the danger that al Nusra fighters will simply rebrand or change their armbands in order to avoid being targeted by Syria and Russia. This has always been a risk, and by now it's safe to assume that both Russia and Syria understand this dynamic and are studying any possible deviations by groups in question.

For the average Syrian, however, this agreement won't necessarily change much on the ground in places where a multitude of terrorists led by Jabat al Nusra and ISIS are still active – both groups will remain legitimate targets for the Syrian Arab Army, and for Russian and Syrian air missions. The threat of terrorism is still a day to day reality for Syrians everywhere.

Moscow Sets the Pace, Agenda

To be sure, Washington cannot be too pleased about this agreement. It has no seat at the table in this discussion and, has once again, found itself playing catch-up with Moscow on the diplomatic front.



Ever since it entered the Syria battle theatre in autumn of 2015, Russia has been consistent and effective in maintaining pole position in Syria. It gained that position from the moment the Russian General convened [a brief meeting](#) at the US Embassy in Baghdad on September 30, 2015, just after Russian President Putin took to the podium some 6,000 miles away at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City. From that moment on, Eurasia's Grand Chessboard suddenly tilted – eastward. Russia realised one of the fundamental advantages in the *Art of War*, the element of surprise. Washington was playing catch-up. Prior to that, Moscow had offered a full range of support items for Syria including equipment, technical support, missile defense systems and most importantly its diplomatic support, particularly by the hand of a canny Sergey Lavrov (right) who seized the initiative in September 2013 by [brokering the disarmament of Syria's chemical weapons stocks](#), thus diffusing a potential pretext for an impending US-led, all-out attack on Syria following a highly questionable 'chemical weapons' incident in East Ghouta in August of that year.

As helpful as this was for Syria, it was not enough to repel a foreign invasion of hundreds of thousands of foreign mercenaries and takfiri terrorist fighters who poured in and out of Syria, through Turkey and Jordan's giant revolving doors at their borders from 2011 onwards. While the US was busy flying hundreds of innocuous air sorties over Syrian airspace from the summer of 2014 purporting to be 'fighting ISIS,' Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah were busy fighting terrorists, and dictating facts on the ground in the process. When Russian airpower *legally* (key word) arrived by way of the expressed invitation of Damascus in October 2015, it was a game changer for Syria. Arguably, this was a major factor in the eventual liberation of Aleppo from terrorist occupation in December 2016, which remains one of the pivotal turning points in this long war. Beyond the battlefield in Syria, the move had global implications. Unlike in Iraq and Libya, by taking the initiative, Russia had set the pace, and therefore was setting the agenda for Syria, and the region.

During my travels here in Syria, one remark has often been made. It seems to be widely understood by Syrians that had Russia not arrived when they did, and in dominant fashion, it's possible that at least half of Aleppo could still be under Al Nusra occupation, and that many other areas around the country, including significant parts of Damascus could have met a similar fate. In fact, it was the liberation of East Aleppo that initiated the current progression of Russian-brokered ceasefire talks which has led to this current series in Astana, Kazakstan.

Presently, most of the populated areas in Syria are already liberated from 'rebel' terrorist control, so as far as Russia is concerned a military victory has already been realised, and the Astana agreement is a logical progression forward. Learning from the mistakes of the West, Russia may be keen to avoid the same sort of 'mission creep' which has defined the US-

NATO quagmire in Afghanistan. For Russia, this next phase may be about coming to grips with some of the wider geopolitical power-plays in and around Syria, rather than proclaiming some comprehensive 'fix' to the crisis in Syria.

Eastern Center of Gravity

Another problem is the US, UK and its NATO partners, along with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others – have been directly arming and bankrolling these extremists, thus prolonging the conflict considerably. Knowing all this (which Russia and its Astana partners do), it is almost physically impossible for East and West to hold any meaningful multilateral negotiations regarding Syria. To borrow a term from former US Secretary of State John Kerry, both sides are inhabiting 'parallel universes' when it comes to this crisis – only the US side of that parallel universe is considerably further away from a realistic centre, or its natural centre of geopolitical gravity. This brings us to the second key aspect of the Astana talks, which will never be spoken of in western mainstream media, that with Astana, the centre of gravity on this issue has shifted away from Washington and Geneva, drifting eastward to Moscow and Astana.

The only thing which needs to happen now, for the sake of Syria and its roughly 20 million citizens and millions of displaced refugees both foreign and domestic, is for Damascus to be more integrated into that geopolitical orbit. In other words, the time needs to come when serious international negotiations have to take place in Damascus, too. However, for the time being, it's likely better for Syria that Russia is leading the international diplomatic agenda, and *not* the United States.

21WIRE's Patrick Henningsen talked to RT International on Thursday May 4th as the agreement was signed; he discusses some of the main aspects of the Astana Talks:

Sabotaging Ceasefires

Still, ceasefires have proved difficult to enforce on the ground – not because of what Russia or the Syrian government were doing, but because of infighting and even outright sabotage by the various and sundry 'rebel' terrorist factions marauding in conflict zones. Just before the agreement was signed, [rival militants in Eastern Ghouta attacked each other](#), killing at least 40 people in the first 24 hours of hostilities. Many of the rival factions are vying for territory, weapons, status, and of course money, which is not much different than gang warfare – which is where the situation is at right now in many 'rebel-held' districts.

There is also the danger that the US, or one of its allies could sabotage a ceasefire agreement.

These are not new issues. Back on September 9, 2016, Russia and the US actually agreed on a ceasefire plan with similar objectives to Astana: a cessation of Syrian government airstrikes in certain 'de-escalation' areas and for Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the US Secretary of State John Kerry to cooperate on joint efforts against terrorists. Lavrov announced this after marathon talks with John Kerry. Like Astana, Russia and US were seeking some mutual recognition of the core obstacle to any multilateral agreement – that Jabat al Nusra was 'blending' with the west's so-called moderate opposition. Kerry even admitted then that,

“going on Al-Nusra is not a concession to anybody” but “is profoundly in the interests of the US.”

Incredibly, Kerry [also agreed](#) to the establishment of the Russian-US Joint Implementation Centre (JIG) with the *“delineation of territories controlled by Al-Nusra and opposition groups in the area of active hostilities.”*

Yes, they were nearly on the same page, *until...*

On September 17th, the US-led a one hour-long airstrike which [massacred over 70 Syrian Army soldiers](#) and wounded 100 others near the city of Deir al-Zour. Here the US was in gross violation of any and all ceasefire agreements. Coincidentally (or not), that US attack allowed ISIS forces to advance on the government-held position. Of course, the initial US reaction was to blame Russia, followed by [a public meltdown](#) at the UN by then ambassador Samantha Power.

That fragile international pause was plunged into further turmoil on September 20th, following another improbable stroke of luck for the terrorist confabs Jabat al Nusra, Arar al Sham, and Nour al din al-Zenki who were operating near Aleppo and in the nearby Idlib province. Suddenly a UN sponsored international humanitarian aid convoy was attacked and burned in Urm al-Kubra, a village west of Aleppo. Immediately, the US State Department and the UK Foreign Office blamed both the Syrian and Russian airforces for the attack, even before any investigation was carried out. Miraculously (as is always the case) [the infamous White Helmets](#) were on the scene with their cameras filming away (while the trucks were still on fire) and claiming the convoy was attacked by Syrian Army ‘barrel bombs’ and Russian jets, although they never could make up their mind which one it was. As it turns out, all [available evidence suggests that this incident was staged](#), but the damage had already been done.

After the UN convoy incident, once again, Samantha Power launched another shrill tirade at the UN which indicated that there might be some US ulterior motive in both of these unlikely incidents. At the time, [many analysts believed](#) the State Department was being undermined by the hawks in the Pentagon. All available evidence indicates this was likely the case. That could have been the turning point in Syria’s long war – and would have also helped to repair US-Russia relations with the two powers agreeing to target both ISIS and al Nusra in Syria. That never happened. Perhaps Washington’s *Deep State* had already ‘priced in’ a Hillary Clinton victory in November. Regardless, the damage was done, and Syria continued to bleed. To be sure, it was this chain of events that spawned the Astana Process.

These two improbable events, Deir al-Zour and the UN Aid Convoy, damaged US-Russian relations and stalled any hope of upholding any multiparty ceasefire. By that time, enough of the western public had come to understand what Syria, Russia and Iran already knew: where ever you found them, Jabat al Nusra dominated all ‘rebel’ fighting groups in Syria. So no multiparty solution was viable unless al Nusra was prioritised alongside ISIS. In addition, it is a fact terrorist factions and their support groups like the White Helmets are equipped and financed by the US, UK, NATO member states, as well as Gulf monarchies Saudi Arabia and Qatar. One could reasonably conclude that on occasion the US-led Coalition could at any time employ their proxies on the ground in Syria in order to *forge* facts on the ground, and in doing so dictate the military and diplomatic agenda going forward. It worked, but only temporarily.

It's important to note that these are the chief highlights of US 'diplomacy' in Syria, and its string of screw-ups. Washington and its partners have only themselves and these fabricated crisis situations to blame for being sidelined on any potential diplomatic solution for Syria.



Astana Memorandum was signed last week (Image: Wikicommons)

Redefining the Language of the Conflict

Throughout this long war, the Washington-led coalition has relied on creative language to characterise its clandestine proxies and partners on the ground, by referring to radical militants as either “moderate rebels,” “armed opposition” and even as “political opposition” – rather than calling them what nearly every single Syrian knows them as – which is *terrorists*. And these terrorists are using local civilian populations as human shields.

This brings us to another key point which is being overlooked by the international media when it comes to the Astana Process. Astana is also redefining the *language* of the conflict – away from the western terms and definitions. This means that any new terms and conditions of any agreement going forward will be codified by refined definitions. This is extremely important, because by accurately defining and agreeing on who exactly are the extremists or terrorists operating in and around Syria, all the legal stakeholders on the ground, Syria, Russia and Iran, are able to actually track measurable results. This was not possible under the US formulated terms and labels. Any such results were impossible by relying on intentionally vague, distorted terms like ‘moderate rebel.’ Russia knows this, and of course Damascus and its allies do as well. Contrast this approach to the US-led Geneva process which has, in all practical terms, rendered meaningless, simply by nature of the fact that US and its allies refuse to classify certain extremist fighters in Syria as the radical salafist and Wahabi *terrorists* that they actually are (including the Free Syrian Army), or acknowledge that their leadership ranks are comprised mainly of foreign commanders and mercenaries.

More powerful than any military campaign, this western propaganda project has helped to sustain the long and dirty war against Syria. Part of the West’s success in carrying on the

diplomatic charade for so long has been because of a highly coordinated, multibillion dollar propaganda campaign against Syria, led by TV giants CNN, NBC, FOX, the BBC, Al Jazeera, Channel 4, along with mainstream publications like the New York Times, Washington Post, TIME Magazine and countless others. Since 2011, the talking points have become institutionalized, namely,

“Assad is a brutal dictator who is slaughtering innocent Arab Spring protesters,” followed by,

“Assad must go, Syria needs a political transition [regime change]” followed by,

“Assad is using chemical weapons against his own people, he must be removed from power,” followed by,

“The West needs to support the rebel freedom fighters,” followed by,

“We, the US [UK, France, etc] need to fight ISIS because Assad and the Russians aren’t doing it,” followed by,

“Assad and Putin are targeting schools and hospitals, killing children,” and finally,

“Sunnis, Shias and Kurds can no longer live together in Syria now, and so the country must be partitioned,” etc.

Due to this program of mass media conditioning, for the most part, people in the West are generally clueless about what has been, and what really is happening in Syria.

This propaganda campaign has also provided a false backdrop to the US-echoed claim the Geneva Process is all about finding a “long term political settlement for Syria” – which is physically impossible if armed militants are allowed to continue terrorizing the population of Syria. Any Syrian will tell you this is what they have been doing over the last 6 years. And that’s the rub: by correctly labeling militants as *terrorists* it automatically delegitimizes what the West have insisted on calling “rebel opposition” and makes them foreign-backed hostiles instead. That’s why Washington has been fighting tooth and nail all along with its ‘name game’ for extremists operating in Syria, and even going so far as to give political cover and an air of legitimacy to terrorists in Syria.

The other important point of language which is being redefined by the Astana Process is the concept of ‘Safe Zones’ and ‘No Fly Zones.’ In the US-led version of this language, a *No Fly Zone* is synonymous with *Safe Zone* and means that no one can fly in the areas except US Coalition aircraft – who we’re told need to do so in order to enforce the no-fly policy. So in reality, a US-led no-fly zone is not really a no fly zone, as we’ve already learned from Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya. Any US or NATO-administered no-fly zone will ultimately become a Coalition bombing zone, as the West use the overlord status to wipe out any potential adversaries on the ground, as well as government facilities and key infrastructure. By contrast, according to the terms of this Russian-led proposal, ‘no fly’ means *no fly*, period. That also means that no US aircraft will be allowed to fly over the four newly designated de-escalation zones. Should militants resume hostilities on the ground, the ‘no-fly’ part of the deal could then be suspended citing interests of both civil and national security. This is a fair proposition, especially considering the incredible volume of violence already perpetrated by

‘rebel’ terrorists against Syrians across the country.

‘Rebel Walk-Out’

Inviting your enemy to the table is not an easy thing, but if it can change the terms of the relationship, then it’s a definite option.

As soon as Thursday’s agreement in Astana was announced, one of the ‘rebel’ leaders, Yasser Abdul Raheem, the representative of rebel “Sham Legion,” exploded in front of conference delegates shouting, ‘Iran is a criminal and we will not accept its signature!’ Perhaps this visible tantrum for the cameras came at the instruction of his US and Gulf sponsors, but his performance only furthers Syria’s extremely valid case that the “rebels” are not actually fit to engage in any real civilized diplomacy, much less lead a nation, or govern over a populace. So much for the ‘revolution.’

Over the course of the Astana Process, opposition groups in attendance have included the likes of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jaysh al-Islam, Faylak al-Sham and Jaish al-Mujahideen, under the somewhat inflated and pretentious banner of the “High Negotiation Committee.” Some of the groups have actually sent delegates to the Astana negotiations, while others like known terrorist group and [CIA affiliate](#), Arar al Sham, declined to attend. By attending, militants are entered into the process, and henceforth are automatically defining themselves as a subgroup, nested underneath the nation state members in attendance, and as long as they are there, they are subsequently bound by the terms of the ceasefire process. By *not* attending, or not agreeing to participate, these groups are simply confirming what Syria, Russia and Iran already knew – that they are rogue militants who have no place at the table. Either way, the process places everyone into a hierarchical position. This is what the Astana Process is: an opportunity to define the playing field, and to allow anyone who believes they are a serious stakeholder an opportunity to come forward and prove that they are. By participating in the process of de-escalation and reaching some ceasefire accord, they will be judged according to their actions, present and future. If they want a seat at any future political table, then they will have to change their program. If they are unrepentant terrorists, then they will not have much to offer the process in the long run, and will eventually disqualify themselves altogether which could very likely be the case with most militant groups.

That said, there are many in Syria who believe this new deal is giving way too much quarter to the militant groups, and will be used by ‘rebel’ terrorists to re-arm and resupply.

Many Syrians might also be wary of any deal reached with Ankara, considering the central role that Turkey has played in harboring extremists and in the destruction of the Syrian economy, particularly in [the systematic dismantling and organised theft of Aleppo’s industrial sector](#). Granted, Syrians may never forgive Turkey for what they’ve done throughout the crisis, but de-escalation is still a higher priority.

The whole process is both risky and unprecedented, but the alternatives might be even worse for Syria. There is no more grand modus operandi or masterplan. After 6 years of violence, the country has had enough of war.



IMAGE: US President Donald Trump went head over heels for the alleged 'chemical attack' in Khan Sheikhun, Idlib on April 4, 2017, Idlib.

Western Miracles

Time will tell how the Astana agreement plays out, but the important point here is that the new *eastern coalition* comprised of Russia, Iran, Turkey – is spearheading this latest effort, and thus defining the terms of the conflict and any meaningful peace process going forward.

The timing of Astana is important because it preempts the coming Geneva Talks, and for the time being this puts Astana on equal footing with Geneva – and that is extremely significant in the current context because it symbolises a bona fide geopolitical realignment. If Washington, London and Paris are still married to their old imperial ways, they cannot be happy about such a shift, and you can be certain that there are already plans being drawn-up to undermine any progress in Astana, and in Syria... either by way of another miraculous 'chemical weapons' event or some other 'humanitarian outrage' drama which will be played out for Western media audiences and used to justify increased US-led intervention, followed by predictable calls for regime change in Damascus.

Naturally, Washington and the Trump Administration would like to declare a 'win' in Syria, presumably in its assumed epic, existential "fight against ISIS," and as the US would like to stage-manage this war, it has no real control over events because it is not dictating facts on the ground this time. The Battle for Mosul should be a lesson to the new White House administration that victory is neither quick, nor clear-cut in this multi-layered military theatre.

Another more likely miracle which you can expect to materialise for Washington's Coalition and used to reverse any gains made in Astana – is that *ISIS* might magically manifest (as they so often do, and always on cue) in one of the four 'De-escalation Zones' designated in the Astana agreement. Again, this would allow the US to then barge in and disrupt the Astana Process and increase its military footprint in and around Syria.



RAQQA & IDLIB: Two terrorist strongholds in Syria, with battles coming soon (PHOTO: Patrick Henningsen @21WIRE)

Northern Front: Last August, Turkey invaded Syria in what was dubbed “[Operation Euphrates Shield](#),” in an effort to stop Kurdish forces from connecting Afrin in northwestern Syria with the strategic town of Manbij. This was eventually followed by US ground forces in the form of Ranger Units and Marines deployed to support the newly formed ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’ (SDF), who are essentially Kurdish YPG militias with an additional patch on their arm and more US money and weapons. This is part of the *Race to Raqqa*, dubbed by the SDF as “Wrath of the Euphrates” – an operation designed to defeat ISIS there, where a very complicated and potentially dangerous conclave has already formed which includes terrorist militants ISIS, FSA, Al Nusra, along with [US forces](#), Russian Special Forces, Kurdish militia, Turkish forces, [British Special Forces](#), [French Special Forces](#), and of course the Syrian Arab Army (let us not forget it’s their country, too). Kurdish SDF forces are doing the heavy lifting against ISIS and a number of front lines are forming including Deir ez-Zor, Tal al-Samam and Tabaqa. Aside from Syria, Russia and the Kurdish militias, none of those international deployments inside Syria are legal, but they are being tolerated, and the situation is being *managed*, in the interests of not triggering a major conflagration between the major powers.

Meanwhile, Turkey has publicly declared the Kurdish militias as ‘terrorists’ and a threat to their national security. This is one reason why Turkey moved to sign the Astana agreement. Immediately after Astana, the US seemed to have seen Turkey’s raise – announcing this week that [it will now be arming the Kurdish YPG fighters directly](#) (in “the fight against ISIS”) rather than through middle men and the US confab SDF forces. Washington’s bold move is sure to anger Turkey, and [Turkey has warned the US](#) that US assets on the ground could be caught in the crossfire.

As the Race to Raqqa intensifies this month, it will no doubt place additional pressure on resources needed to hold the Astana Process.

Southern Front: There is a second US-led front emerging along the Syrian and Jordanian border, and one which could cause some major problems for Syria should it spill into Syria.

Back in 2016, the US released its latest militant construct, the “New Syrian Army” trained in Jordan by NATO member states like the US and Norway, and with the supposed mission of ‘defeating ISIS.’ They were [defeated in their first clash with ISIS](#) at the Syrian border town of Bukamal last summer. Despite their complete failure, the project is still alive in Jordan, where renewed US-led efforts are underway to ‘train and equip’ other US-backed militants including a new FSA brigade. This time, they might be backed by actual US, British and Jordanian forces, as well as French and Polish Special Forces – who have all been gradually amassing on the border inside Jordan under the banner of ‘[Operation Eager Lion](#)’ from May 2016. In theory, any subsequent US-led effort would be used to support the advance to Deir ez-Zor, again under the guise of “defeating ISIS” but in reality this could quickly lead a de facto US-UK-Jordanian occupation of parts of southern Syria.

ISIS will eventually be defeated in Syria. At that point, the question then remains: will the remaining foreign occupying forces remain in Syria and will this lead to a partitioning of Syria?

Israeli Ambitions

If a US-backed invasion from the southern front occurs, you can expect that Israel will use this opportunity to take strategic points in the Syria’s southern Golan Heights region most likely under the guise of ‘stopping Hezbollah.’

Ever since the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was forced to withdraw from the demilitarized zone separating contested Syrian and Israeli positions in the Golan Heights, as if by magic, both ISIS and Jabat al-Nusra terrorists quickly took over the surrounding area. ISIS and Jabat al-Nusra had already infested Daara in the south, as well as key junctions like Quneitra, and also in the Damascus suburb of Yarmouk.

On April 22nd, Israeli rockets were fired from Golan and hit targets in Damascus. No doubt, this was a test salvo from Israel. Tel Aviv knows very well that any move it decides to make against Syria here will be met with no resistance from the West, therefore they are free to act with total impunity against Syria. But Israel will still be cautious on this front, and would need an excuse to make any serious move into the Golan. Most likely, it would have to be for ‘security concerns’ – perhaps even ‘ISIS concerns’ – which would radically change this conflict.

Here we can see ISIS and Al Nusra playing a perfect made-to-order recipe for Israel to achieve its own long-held territorial ambitions.

Partitioning Syria and Irony of ‘Rebel’ Walk-out at Astana

The main reason for the ‘opposition’ walk-out at Astana, punctuated by the public unhinging of Yasser Abdul Raheem from the Sham Legion, is the fact that Iran has been listed as a military guarantor of this stage of the peace process. The ‘rebel’ delegation appears also to be concerned about the potential that this deal might trigger the eventual break-up of Syria proper. What’s interesting about this part of the drama is that since 2011, the so-called ‘rebels’ have been aiding and abetting the apparent US and Israeli long game for Syria – which is to partition or break-up the country, weakening it in the process. Could these ‘rebels’ have been so naive or just plain dumb to not see that the foreign governments like the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel and others, who have been sponsoring them with cash and arms and giving them political backing for the last 6 years – have used this

conflict to weaken the Syrian nation state, before pushing to partition and carve-up Syria? It certainly seems so.

On its surface, this situation may appear to defy conventional logic up to this point, but it's possible Syria's unity could actually be helped by the Astana Process. You only have to look at who is opposing the deal – the 'rebels,' the US, and the Gulf States – all enemies of Syria from the onset.

There is a risk of partitioning, especially if international peace keepers are inserted into this equation. For both Syria and Russia, once multilateral peacekeepers are inserted, the battle lines are essentially frozen at that point, albeit temporarily. This is a legitimate fear for those opposing federalisation or partitioning in Syria. To be sure, this is why Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem has openly opposed such an idea. From a Syrian point of view, and based on the successes it has already achieved with Russia through the reconciliation center, Syria and Russia are capable of administering the four 'safe zones.' Beyond that however, this plan may need to be reevaluated, and would require additional international support.

It's interesting to note also that Turkey may not have signed the Astana Memorandum if it had had serious deep seated fears the signing might lead to decentralisation, or a federalised break-up of Syria into semi-autonomous 'state lettes.' From Ankara's perspective, such a scenario might also encourage similar repercussions for Turkey's own increasingly centralized state. The idea of an autonomous Kurdish canton in northern Syria could be seen by Turkey as a major threat, in that it would encourage Kurdish autonomy in parts of Turkey, and in neighboring Iraq, too. This scenario is regarded as 'the ultimate nightmare' for Ankara.

As much as Washington would like a sectarian Syria, complete with a [confessionalist, Lebanese-style government](#) divide based on religion, leading to a weak central government, this simply cannot happen in Syria because the idea of a tolerant, multi-faith society is a central part of the Syrian national identity. Neoconservatives might be slow to grasp this reality, only because many of them are still intoxicated by their success in creating a sectarian nightmare in Iraq which has left that country in ruins, and with a weak central state, completely reliant on various sources of foreign aid.

Surprisingly, the US has had little to say about the structure of the Astana agreement and the terms laid out. As with the 'opposition,' the inclusion of Iran seems to be a major deal-breaker. According to US State Department [officials](#),

"Iran's activities in Syria have only contributed to the violence, not stopped it, and Iran's unquestioning support for the Assad regime has perpetuated the misery of ordinary Syrians."

US protests against Iran's involvement in the process should be viewed through an Israeli lens, and no doubt AIPAC has circulated Tel Aviv's talking points on Capitol Hill in advance of any agreement.

Despite US and 'rebel' protests, the reality is that Iran's contribution of reinforcements to Syria has helped with maintaining overall security and has helped to give stability to many areas liberated from terrorist control, like East Aleppo. Washington and Israel might not like

this, but what should really count in any international agreement is what the majority of Syrians see as the benefit of Iran's involvement to date – which is increased security for liberated, government-controlled areas in Syria. Not surprisingly, this is something that 'rebel' groups have shown no genuine interest in since 2011.

Divine Intervention: Home Grown Terror, or Chemical Weapons 'Intelligence'?

The other scenario for a *Western Miracle* is divine humanitarian intervention.

When you see statements like this in prominent White Helmet PR vehicles like [The Guardian](#), citing the BBC, it should be a cause for concern:

"America's initial reluctance to jump behind the Russian safe zone plan is underscored by reports that western intelligence believes it knows the location of three sites where the Syrian government is still making chemical weapons in breach of undertakings given to the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons."

"The BBC reported the intelligence documents showed chemical and biological munitions were being produced at three main sites near Damascus and Hama. All three are branches of the Scientific Studies and Research Centre, a government agency. They allege that both Iran and Russia, the Syrian government's allies, have knowledge of Syria's activity."

That's right – more vague WMD 'intelligence' from unnamed 'sources'... just in case. It's an endless narrative. Wait, but there's more:

"The French government last month published an intelligence report claiming: "France considers that Syria, despite the commitment to destroy all its stocks and capacities, has maintained a productive capacity."

The US, along with the UK and France are looking to re-occupy the center of this discussion and thus dictate the pace *and* the process, there exists a clear pattern of events and behaviour.

If we look back at past events over recent years, the US has not engaged in any serious all-party diplomacy but instead has relied on increasing its military power in and around Syria to build its hand at the table. The main pretext to re-ignite a US, UK and French intervention is the ultimate prime mover, *national security*. The trigger for this has always been some random 'ISIS-inspired' terrorist attack somewhere in North America or Europe, or a some unlikely 'chemical weapons' event. 'Home-grown' ISIS attacks are normally well-timed events which open the door for military deployments in the Middle East.

Likewise chemical weapons incidents also seem to be timed to perfection, followed by loud displays of righteous indignation in the West, followed by damning tweets from Ken Roth at Human Rights Watch, and general calls in the West for a humanitarian intervention. Make of that what you will, but it's a proven pattern of behaviour by now. Before the alleged 'chemical attack' at Khan Sheikhun in Idlib, Syria on April 4, 2017, the US and its new President were trailing behind the Astana Process and fighting for foreign policy coherence around the Syria conversation. Then, in "decisive" fashion, the Pentagon fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles hitting Shayrat Airbase near Homs, suddenly Washington seemed to be back

in the game, sort of. Suddenly, CNN *et al* (the same mainstream media who were raking him over 'Russian Influence' hearings) began gushing over "President" Trump. Even Democrats were flirting because they saw this move as a move against Russian interests. Trump got a much-needed bounce in the polls and it was all happy Tweets and smiles from the golf course as the President finally discovered his path to public approval – war. But the revelry was short-lived. To date, there has been no forensic investigation into the Khan Sheikhun incident on April 4, 2017, partly because [an independent investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons \(OPCW\) is being blocked](#), namely the US and the UK. As a result, skepticism is growing, even in the West, that the infamous 'sarin gas' attack in Idlib was nothing more than [a well-choreographed, staged event](#) orchestrated in part by the US and UK-funded [Oscar winning](#) 'first responder NGO' [embedded exclusively with terrorists Jabat Al Nusra](#), the White Helmets, and amplified by the western media – exactly like other improbable 'WMD' events like [East Ghouta in August 2013](#), and mirroring shades of Iraq in 2003.

The reality is that on numerous occasions to date, the 'rebel' militants [have been caught using chemical weapons](#) and killing civilians. Incidents include chlorine, mustard gas, (crude) sarin, and white phosphorus. A recent report by the OPCW concluded that [terrorists in Aleppo used banned chemical weapons](#) against civilian populations. So the body of evidence points to the 'rebels' but these findings are conveniently ignored by the western mainstream media, its politicians and bureaucrats.

Doubling Down on Sanctions

This week President Trump renewed economic sanctions on Syria for another year, based on those same alleged 'war crimes by the Assad Regime' i.e. chemical weapons.

To people the US sanctions are viewed as a fairly sterile affair – freezing the assets of government officials, and banning trade with Syria. The policy reads:

"[In] accordance with section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act, 50 USC 1622(d), I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency declared with respect to the actions of the Government of Syria."

We're told in the West that these are designed to 'change the behavior of the regime,' as if collective punishment of the Syrian people will encourage them to rise up and perform another Arab Spring for the cameras. In fact, sanctions are responsible for the failing economy, shortages of essential supplies including medicine, rapid inflation, mass unemployment, mass migration, crippling infrastructure, and contribute to the recruitment of thousands of young men into extremist militias, including terrorist groups. In other words, they undermine peace and stability on the ground. And that's not a mistake on the part of Washington and its allies – it's by design.

Either way, be sure that the War on Terror Troika – Washington, London and Paris, will try to reserve the right to strike at a place and time of its choosing in order to 'fight ISIS' wherever ISIS appears – including in any of Astana's four designated 'Safe Zones.'

It's important to note, in case it has been completely forgotten, that any US, Turkey, Israel or other NATO member state deployments on the ground in Syria or over its airspace – is completely illegal by International Law, and also unconstitutional by respective western

legal standards.

Since the onset of the conflict, the US, its Coalition – especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have conveniently used the chaos they themselves have sown in Syria by arming and financing ‘the rebellion’ – in order to further their own military and geopolitical objectives in the region. In doing so, the US and its Coalition have damaged their own credibility and in doing so have really forfeited any place at any peace negotiations table. How can countries like the US, UK, EU member states, the Gulf states or Jordan, be involved in *any* accords if they have been directly involved in giving material support to extremists thus fomenting the violence on the ground and further the war itself?

For this reason, all of the Geneva meetings on Syria cannot be a leading forum, and are effectively another ineffective talking shop, as the US-led Coalition has basically ditched International Law when it comes to Syria. The same argument could be extended to Yemen as well.



Al Nusra fighters were among the evacuees from al-Waer in Homs in April (PHOTO: Patrick Henningsen @21WIRE)

Syria's Reconciliation Process

In the background, behind the high-profile scenes in Astana, something truly incredible is taking place – and it's something that neither the Western mainstream media, nor the politicians want the public to hear about.

One of the most under-reported and most incredible stories taking place right now in Syria is the progress being made through Syria's reconciliation process. The initial program was launched in 2012, led by [Dr. Ali Haidar](#). The program allowed for a “reconciliation” process for those Syrian ‘rebel’ terrorists who laid down their arms and engaged in the “reconciliation” process. If successful, they could either return to regular life in the community, or they could join the Syrian Arab Army to fight extremist militants on the government side. Then in February 2016, the Russian and Syrian governments ramped-up this program to another level, with Moscow spearheading the Russian Center for

Reconciliation in Syria. Through this joint venture, the Syrian government has managed to secure signed Cessation of Hostilities agreements from numerous militant groups in multiple provinces. The program allows militants and terrorists a clear path to evacuate, with their families, out from what the West refer to as “rebel-held” (and what most Syrians refer to as “terrorist-held”) conflict zones to further afield extremist strongholds in the north like Idlib and Jarablus. These evacuations have already happened in heavy fighting areas like al-Waer near Homs, Daraa, Jabab and more recently this week from Damascus suburbs of [Barzeh and Qaboun](#).

According to the center, the number of populated localities in Syria that have joined this process is now over 1,400, with the number of armed groups signing on so far totaling around 140. Both Russia and Turkey are cooperating to act as guarantors to the ceasefire deals and also to share the responsibility of monitoring violations. Like Astana, this program does not extend to ISIS, although some al Nusra fighters have been among the militants making their way to Idlib.

One amazing thing about this program is that the Syrian and Russian governments have guaranteed safe passage for militants out of areas in order to bring hostilities to an end. From a public relations standpoint, any success here is ultimately bad for the West, the Gulf states and the ‘rebels’, because it flies in the face of everything they have been saying about ‘the brutal regime’ in Damascus. Contrast this to some of the absolute heinous acts perpetrated by ‘rebel’ terrorists – against civilian evacuees, including the mass murder of innocents [from the villages of Foua and Kefraya](#) at Rashidine near Aleppo in April.

Overall however, the program is generating some success and reducing fighting in many areas, while extremists are shipped north into areas with high concentrations of extremists, like Idlib (the second ‘Islamic State’ in the making), although numerous reports suggest that some rather well-off terrorists and ‘rebel’ leaders are taking the spoils of their lucrative enterprises (foreign cash, trafficking in weapons, stolen goods, drugs, extortion rackets and other items accumulated over 6 years of war) and settling in Turkey.

This program somewhat reflects the Astana Process, in that it’s a huge calculated risk which brings temporary respite in conflict zones, but doesn’t necessarily eradicate the core problem of the violent extremists. Like Astana, there is no guarantee it will be a complete success, but it is allowing for temporary relief in many areas which is important to the Syrian public.

Astana ‘Compromise’ vs World War III

Just the idea of allowing foreign troops from “observer nations” to be deployed along the various demarcation lines of the four ‘Safe Zones’ appears like a giant red flag to many who believe that the Astana Process is the same as previous Western calls for *safe zones* in Syria – which will lead to the break-up of the country.

To some skeptical committed supporters of Damascus, this might seem like Russia is ‘selling out’ Damascus in order to realize its own geopolitical ambitions. To reach such a conclusion would require that the Astana terms and conditions are the same as those drawn up by the West – which they clearly are not. Neither are the players involved here or the intention behind the agreement.

No one knows Syria better than Syrians. Already, the war has broken up into multiple

potential geographical disputes. What's important here, is that all interested parties acknowledge that the situation in Syria has escalated to such a degree and the list of international and regional participants is now so vast, that the wider geopolitical picture may have eclipsed the issue of Syria itself. Put another way, the Russian-led effort could also be viewed as an attempt to avoid a dangerous impasse, at least in the short to near term. After so many years of US and its allies' efforts to deliberately undermine and destabilize its country, Damascus is well aware that any US-led efforts will not be positive for Syria and will likely disregard any national interests. With that in mind, Damascus is placing a tremendous amount of trust in Russia which is considering the interests of Syria.

If regional cantons are lost in the short term to some internationally recognised, or internationally imposed federal lay-out, this does not necessarily mean that they cannot return into the Syrian national fold. Damascus could very well re-incorporate them a later point in time, although such a future scenario also presents a huge risk for Damascus.

There is no guarantee that this agreement will hold, nor will it guarantee a just settlement for Syrian people in the future. What it does guarantee is a start to a process, led not by the West, but by the *East*. For that reason, both the *Reconciliation Process in Syria* and the *Astana Process* are groundbreaking efforts.

Sometimes peace comes at a price. In the short term, Syria may have but a few viable options, and therefore a calculated risk would seem more attractive than the other alternative – which is a complete collapse of a nation, or World War III breaking out over your homeland.

In matters of state and dealing with empires, Syria has over 6,000 years of experience, which is something the war hawks and nation-builders in Washington may never understand.

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