

What Awaits Syria at the Astana Talks?

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The Russian-Iranian-Turkish Tripartite is preparing to mediate a new round of intra-Syrian talks in Astana sometime soon, and President Assad just announced that he is ready to negotiate on “everything” provided that the process follows the legal mechanisms laid out in the Syrian Constitution.

Australian professor and prominent Syrian activist Tim Anderson is correct when he wrote in his [latest article](#) for the Centre for Research on Globalization that “wars are always concluded with political settlements”, and that’s certainly going to be the case with the War of Terror on Syria. The game-changing Tripartite partnership between Russia, Iran, and Turkey – originally forecasted by the author over six months ago in a series of articles listed at this [link](#) – is taking the lead in resolving this conflict by organizing the upcoming intra-Syrian talks in Astana, which importantly exclude the participation of the US.

President Assad told French media in an [exclusive interview](#) that he’s willing to negotiate on “everything”, but that the process must be in line with the legal mandates set out in the Syrian Constitution. If any sort of compromise is reached which leads to an outcome separate from that which is allowed under existing Syrian law, then the constitution must be changed in order to accommodate this, and the Syrian people must formally agree to any amendments by means of a referendum. This is an important checks-and-balance system which ensures that the results of the peace process will be democratic and represent the will of the Syrian people.

The State Of Affairs

The Russian Drawdown:

Taking stock of the state of affairs in the run-up to the Astana talks, the first thing to be mentioned is that Russia has recently decided to once more draw down its military forces in Syria. It should be remembered that Moscow’s official motivation for accepting Damascus’ intervention request in the first place was to fight terrorism in the Arab Republic, and it appears as though Russian decision makers believe that the historic liberation of Aleppo last month qualifies as significant enough of a victory to justify reducing the Aerospace Forces’ in-country deployment.

Nevertheless, Daesh still occupies Raqqa, Palmyra, and the stretch of desert between these two cities, so Russia isn’t by any means fully withdrawing its military assets from the country until all of it is freed from the terrorists. Plus, it can always redeploy its forces as needed if the situation calls for it, just like it did following the [first drawdown](#) last spring. Considering this, there are two mutually inclusive interpretations that can be offered in explaining the military curtailment decision.

The first one is that this is a goodwill gesture to the consensually agreed-upon “moderate opposition” (the groups participating in the present ceasefire) to encourage their flexibility during the upcoming Astana talks, which would make this a tactical move aimed at promoting a political settlement which corresponds to Russia’s stated aversion to a solely military solution. The second possibility, however, is that this is a signal to President-elect Trump that Russia is potentially interested in carrying out symbolic joint strikes against Daesh if the incoming leader is serious about consecrating his talked-about détente with Moscow, and that both sides could cooperate in carrying out the grand liberation of Raqqa, Palmyra, and the other occupied cities in Syria (so long as Damascus agrees, of course).

The Tripartite:

About the Tripartite, it’s plain to see that its members are actively cooperating with one another, and it can confidently be inferred that Russia and Iran are indirectly liaising between Syria and Turkey, both of whom don’t have any relations with one another and might not be comfortable publicly admitting to secret talks due to their respective domestic political sensitivities. This isn’t just wild speculation either, as it’s extremely unlikely that Turkey’s military operation in northern Syria would have been passively accepted by Damascus (despite its official condemnation at the time) and its Russian and Iranian international protectors had there not been some degree of advance coordination between all sides.



Even so, the presence of Turkish forces in northern Syria is still technically an illegal act because Damascus didn’t give its open and explicit permission for them to be there, regardless if it discretely agreed to this in secret earlier. Therefore, one of the long-term goals that the Syrian government has going into the Astana talks is to encourage the conditions which would eventually result in a Turkish withdrawal. This brings the discussion to the point of analyzing Ankara’s official reason for conventionally intervening in northern Syria, which was to prevent the PYD-YPG Kurds from unilaterally establishing a “federalized” (internally partitioned) statelet all along the southern Turkish borderland.

The Kurdish Question

It’s relevant at this time to recall that the Syrian Ambassador to Moscow [vehemently rejected](#) the PYD-YPG Kurds’ “federal” declaration in early 2016 by unequivocally declaring that:

When one speaks of the federalization of our country, this directly threatens the integrity of our country, runs counter to the Constitution, contradicts the national concepts, even is at variance with the international resolutions and decisions, so all statements of the kind are illegitimate.

This sentiment was soon followed up by President Assad himself who [reaffirmed](#) that “most Kurds want to live in a unified Syria, under a central system, not in a federal system”, later on [adding](#) that any prospective “federal” solution would have to be agreed to by the Syrian people through a referendum and that the current structure is therefore “[temporary](#)”. President Assad is evidently aware of the PYD-YPG Kurds’ hate-filled “federal” manifesto, the contents of which the author analyzed in a [three-part series](#) for the Moscow-based Katehon

think tank, and it shouldn't be seen as a coincidence that the Tripartite chose to exclude this group from the upcoming Astana talks.

Going by Turkey's official 'justification' for commencing its military operation in northern Syria (and which must evidently have been accepted by Russia, Iran, and Syria otherwise they would have actively resisted it at the time), the only condition which would convince Erdogan to withdraw his country's troops from the Arab Republic is if the PYD-YPG "federal" menace is neutralized. The PYD-YPG Kurds recently [removed](#) the ethno-supremacist "Rojava" label from their self-declared and illegal "Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria" likely as a superficial effort to quell Damascus and the Tripartite's unyielding resistance to their geopolitical project by crafting the illusion that it's "inclusive" of all of Syria's other various identities.

Curiously, the Washington Post just [reported](#) that the PYD-YPG Kurds are indoctrinating their Arab allies of the Kurdish-dominated "Syrian Democratic Forces" militant umbrella with the radical Marxist ideology of PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan and the complementary ideas of so-called "democratic confederalism" from their 2015 manifesto. From the looks of it, the anti-government Kurds in Syria's north are trying to disguise their "Greater Kurdistan" project by dressing it up as an "inclusive" effort which is also supposedly promoted by token Arabs, but this might inadvertently backfire on them if the wily Turkish leader senses an opportunity to advance his country's own self-declared interests in this part of Syria and exploits their latest moves.



Erdogan's End Game

Everyone's been wondering what Erdogan's end game is ever since he made the decision to deploy Turkey's conventional forces into northern Syria last August, but it finally looks like the answer is revealing itself. Turkey has reiterated on multiple occasions that it will not allow a Kurdish-led "federal" (internally partitioned) statelet to take shape in northern Syria, arguing that this entity would become a terrorist safe haven for the PKK and other anti-Ankara militant groups. Together with this, the Turkish government regularly floated the idea of a so-called "safe zone" in this region in order to supposedly counter terrorism and prevent the unification of both Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria.

Bridging these two objectives together in tangible practice, Turkey has been systematically seeking to replace the PYD-YPG Kurdish militant presence in this part of Syria with the pro-Ankara "Free Syrian Army" (FSA, which the author personally feels should stand for the "Fake Syrian Army"). Now that the Kurds removed the ethno-supremacist "Rojava" label from their illegal self-declared "federation", it's possible that Turkey could soon throw its weight behind the creation of an FSA-led "federalized" border strip in northern Syria in order to simultaneously cleanse the region of Kurdish militant groups and 'formalize' what Erdogan might be led to believe is a sustainable buffer zone (the so-called "zone safe" which he's always desired).

No matter how hard Erdogan may want an FSA proxy state in northern Syria, there's no way that the country will be "federalized" unless the people themselves agree to this in a forthcoming constitutional referendum, and it's widely expected that they'd reject this plan anyhow. As a means of bettering his hand and improving his odds, however, Erdogan might secretly convey that Turkey could formally reverse its calls of "Assad must go", officially

recognize the Syrian leader as the country's democratically elected president, restore the close pre-war political and economic relations between both states, and commit an undetermined amount of reconstruction funding (reparations) to Syria in exchange for Damascus accepting this proposal.

No matter how enticing such an offer might seem in the short-term, it would actually be a long-term trap meant to permanently restrict Syria's post-war independence and should thus be absolutely avoided unless there's literally no other realistic option available. If it becomes necessary for Syria to compromise, then Damascus could propose the creative solution of "municipal autonomy" as a possibly acceptable decentralized middle ground between centralization and devolution, the details of which were discussed in the author's earlier [Oriental Review](#) article about "[Syria's Diplomatic Ammo Going Into The Astana Political Fight](#)" and would of course have to be confirmed by the Syrian people through a subsequent referendum.

All told, the upcoming Astana talks are meant to be the first tangible step in concluding the War on Syria with a political settlement, just as Professor Anderson wrote, and Damascus must be prepared for pioneering a solution to the seemingly intractable contradictions between its own sovereign interests and the interlinked threats posed by the PYD-YPG Kurds, "federalization" (internal partition), and Turkey's geopolitical designs in northern Syria.



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