

## Russia's Syria Policy

### THE HARD PATH OF MILITARY DISENGAGEMENT

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On December 11, 2017, two and a half years after the start of Russia's military campaign in Syria, President Vladimir Putin, speaking at the Hmeimim Air Base in Syria, declared that the main mission was accomplished and [ordered](#) home the significant part of Russia's military forces. There is still unfinished business for Russia on the military/counterterrorism front, such as providing air support to the Syrian army against the jihadist coalition "Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham" in the Idlib province. However, the critical vector of Russia's Syria policy is now shaped by:

- Regionalization – a shift from a Western-centered to an increasingly region-centered approach, best reflected by, but not confined to, the Astana ceasefire process.
- Trying to make the most out of progress on both military/counterterrorist and ceasefire paths to move Syria toward a political solution through a UN-led process.

Through a combination of these approaches, Russia intends to diminish its direct engagement in and ownership of the Syria problem, while keeping and expanding its multiple regional partnerships in the broader Middle East.

#### **The Astana Process**

In 2017 and early 2018, as part of its regionalization strategy toward Syria, Russia engaged with a variety of regional actors involved in the Syrian conflict. These can be grouped into three tiers.

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The first tier is the Russia-Turkey-Iran-brokered Astana ceasefire format. The Astana process was meant to solve three problems that had impeded progress in the UN-managed political negotiations in Geneva:

- (1) lack of involvement of key actors of the Syrian armed opposition on the ground;
- (2) not being based on a lasting ceasefire; and
- (3) not accounting for major regional powers' interests.

Before these tasks could be solved, two military conditions had to be met:

- (1) a correction of the military balance on the ground in favor of the government (achieved through Russia's direct military engagement in 2015–17); and
- (2) intensified pressure on the more radical transnational jihadists (ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups) through parallel campaigns by Russian-led and US-led coalitions.

Once these military requirements were met, the regionally brokered ceasefire process could start. The eight rounds of Astana discussions in 2017 directly addressed the three deficiencies mentioned above.<sup>2</sup> The Astana talks involved the most serious non-jihadist armed opposition groups, produced a ceasefire that held well relative to previous ones, and introduced four de-escalation zones. It also ensured delineation between Turkish-backed and Iranian-backed forces on the ground.

The second tier includes Egypt, which provided a platform in Cairo for consultations on the Homs and Ghouta de-escalation zones. The realities on the ground in southwest Syria produced the separate "Amman process," which involved Jordan, Israel, Russia, and the United States—with the latter's mediating role [described](#) by Putin as a "significant contribution" and "influencing behind the scenes" overall "in a more positive than negative way." Jordan, the United States, and Egypt also became observers to the Astana discussions.

Despite previous Russian rifts with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Syria (and despite the rift between Riyadh and Doha since 2017), Russia stepped up dialogue with both, forming a looser third tier. This happened as Saudi Arabia's role, in particular, evolved from that of a lead funder of the armed struggle against the Assad regime to that of a lead contributor to efforts to unite the fragmented Syrian opposition as a necessary precondition for the UN peace talks.

The truce consolidation process is far from complete. It is haunted by a tense interplay between military force and negotiation (an unavoidable background for most conflict-to-peace transitions). It also suffers from a good deal of spoiling by

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<sup>2</sup> The next round is planned for March 2018.

actors on both sides – by Assad’s forces and pro-government militias and by domestic and foreign anti-government actors alike. Much of this spoiling is spotty and limited, and cannot fundamentally alter the balance of forces on the ground, critically undermine the Astana process, or stop the expanding “local ceasefire” phenomenon at the inter-communal level. However, lack of progress on humanitarian issues (in areas ranging from Raqqa, liberated from ISIS, to East Ghouta) and emerging complications (such as the Turkish military operation against the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Afrin or escalation of the Israeli-Syrian border tensions in early 2018) already require going above and beyond the Astana format. The Astana ceasefire process does not prioritize humanitarian issues, let alone address key incompatibilities between the parties or other political issues at dispute (such as the Kurdish or the foreign Shia militias issue). In fact, the Astana format might have reached the limit of how much it can contribute to a negotiated solution.

While Astana has been a *sine qua non* stage to improve security conditions and prepare the technical grounds for the Geneva talks to restart in earnest, it cannot replace the UN-level process seeking a negotiated political resolution to the conflict.

### **Track 2 Diplomacy: the Sochi Congress**

Moscow’s initiative to go beyond the Astana format and enter into substantive political talks led it to initiate and host the “Syrian Congress on National Dialogue” in Sochi on January 29-30, 2018. This was an attempt at having more representative and public preliminary consultations among Syrians on issues such as constitutional reforms and elections. It involved inviting stakeholder groups based in Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, and Riyadh, and sought to engage the Kurds and other minorities such as the tribal and non-militant groups not represented so far.

The misconception about Russia’s initiative to organize the Sochi congress was mistaking its Track 2 format (non-governmental dialogue) for the more formal negotiations involving official government and opposition delegations, such as the Astana ceasefire talks or the UN-led peace talks (Track 1 diplomacy). This was probably due to political bias or lack of information. In line with this view, the Western media, parts of the regional media, and various expert and political circles tried to present Sochi as an attempt by Moscow to sideline the UN-backed peace process—a function that a Track 2 dialogue falls short of by default (even so, such negotiations can be included in the broad range of “peace process” activities).

The Sochi congress had the same co-organizers as the Astana talks (now acting more as observers than brokers) and would have been unthinkable had the Astana ceasefire process not held (despite violations by both sides). Facilitating a Track 2 forum for Syrians was the Astana co-brokers’ input into the more substantive Track 1 peace talks under UN auspices. The main direct links to the Geneva track were the

participation of UN Special Envoy on Syria Staffan de Mistura, and the Sochi congress' practical output was the election of a Constitutional Committee that was to be handed over to the UN teams (complemented by including members of opposition groups that were absent in Sochi but embedded in the peace process). The presence of UN delegates as well as regional brokers legitimized the forum as part of the broader peace process framework rather than it being purely "Russia's show." The regional brokers at the congress included a Turkish delegation to which part of the Turkey-backed opposition-minded invitees delegated representation of their interests.

As a Track 2 gathering, the Sochi congress did not involve official delegations from the Syrian government or the opposition. Russia's idea of launching a dialogue spanning the broader socio-political spectrum of Syrians had initially received a cold reaction from Damascus although it ultimately conceded to it.

On the one hand, government loyalists or delegates from areas under government control dominated the number of participants,<sup>3</sup> while the Kurds and the "real opposition,"<sup>4</sup> who attended in a personal capacity, were underrepresented. On the other hand, there was, for the first time, a sizeable presence of tribal and other "local ceasefire" actors who presented unity in forwarding a sustained, resilient and expanding dimension of de-escalation and peace-building on the ground, with close links to, and tangible benefits for, local civilian populations in many areas.

Also, claims about the Sochi congress being a staged event can hardly explain the amount of turmoil, disagreement, emotion, and extemporizing by many of the attendees, and the stiff competition between many of them to be included in the Constitutional Committee. The [final communique](#) from Sochi, inter alia, did not mention Bashar al-Assad. It called for determining the country's future by democratic means (through the ballot box), supporting the national army to act "in accordance with the constitution," and for "intelligence and security institutions" to be "subject to the rule of law."

Even though the outcomes could have been larger, the Sochi congress was not a waste of time. It offered specifics on the dynamics and management of the political peace process on Syria, including:

- The apparent futility of attempts to delink Sochi from Geneva, Track 2 from Track 1 (similar to ineffectual attempts to delink Russia from Geneva);

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<sup>3</sup> They comprised about 1,200 out of 1,392 delegates at the plenary (with 250 more linked to the "internal" opposition, also known as the regime's "pocket" opposition).

<sup>4</sup> Sixty participants who represented the "real opposition" included one third of the members of the opposition's main, Riyadh-based High Negotiations Committee, which had earlier considered to attend and had paid a preparatory visit to Moscow, but at the last minute, while partaking in the failed round of the UN talks, they voted by majority not to attend.

- The demonstrated need for continued and expanded dialogue among Syrians on basic political issues and the direction for national development (such as the form of republican governance, guidelines for decentralization/federalism, the role of the security and armed forces, etc.). The strong sense was that more of these discussions should take place, including in a Track 2-type framework (or as an intermediate “Track 1.5”) that includes the presence of some officials (in personal capacities). Adding to the need for further talks is that the Constitutional Committee, even when complemented by Riyadh-based and other opposition delegates, is insufficient as there has been nowhere near enough intra-societal dialogue on issues to claim that it was a Syria-owned process.

### **Moscow’s “Plan B”**

For Russia, Sochi was a genuine attempt to contribute to conflict resolution. It built on the Astana ceasefire process, launched substantive dialogue on key issues in dispute, and it reactivated the stalled UN process—even if it was only at a Track 2 diplomacy level. Pro-governmental/pro-regional brokers’ bias was perhaps unavoidable in view of the background of Russia’s engagement in Syria and of the continuing changes in situations on the ground in favor of the government. However, these same limitations made this attempted extension of Syria dialogue a no-lose game in view of the broader range of Russia’s exit options. Moscow fully supports the UN peace process on Syria but also keeps under consideration a “Plan B” should that process remain stalled for an indefinite time or fail.

Consolidation and slow expansion of core areas under control of the central government (headed by Assad for a while or in some successor form in the future), with support by Iran and Turkey’s “neutrality,” is often mistaken for Russia’s original “design” for Syria. However, while this has long been the preferred option for Damascus and Iran, this has not been Russia’s (nor, for instance, Turkey’s) *idée fixe*. Moscow might tacitly accept this course of events as a “Plan B” basis, for example if there is no progress in the UN talks or if there is persistent sabotage by both sides on the ground and/or the West.

Failure to understand this nuance is based on misconceptions about Russia’s interests in Syria and overestimation of its strategic importance to Moscow. Russia’s interests in Syria have evolved over two and half years since the start of its military campaign. Russia’s goals at the start of its campaign included antiterrorism, using Syria as a showcase for preventing Western regime change, and as a trump card to restart dialogue with the West, particularly in the midst of the worst post-Cold War Russia-West rift due to the Ukraine situation. An added bonus for Moscow, if the rest worked out, was the possible upgrade of Russia’s standing in the broader Middle East. By now, however, Moscow is firmly set to diminish its ownership of the Syria

problem and has no intention to keep a large-scale, formal, military role in Syria for the long term. This is why Russia cannot afford to indefinitely support any persistently failing effort to find a way out and will choose the type of arrangement that will best ensure a gradual, even if not complete, disengagement in practice, even if it implies tactical and reputational costs.

## **Conclusion**

Russia would have preferred to gradually disown the Syria problem “on good terms,” to make an “honorable exit,” preferably through a negotiated peace solution under the UN framework (leading to a more pluralistic and representative system in Syria involving a degree of genuine power-sharing), to be followed by UN peace-support and peace-building efforts. This would have been a face-saving option not just for Russia but for most other regional and non-regional actors and would undoubtedly be better for Syria, especially in humanitarian, reconciliation, reconstruction, and development terms. However, at the UN-brokered talks, not even direct negotiations, let alone political compromise, between the government and the opposition are in sight. Lack of progress in Geneva de facto gives extra breathing space for the Damascus regime to advance its own preferred solution.

The situation on the ground has been slowly and steadily becoming more unfavorable for the Syrian opposition, which further weakens its negotiation positions (no external support can compensate for a lack of control on the ground). The United States, France, and other Western powers continue to overestimate the real weight of opposition groups and fuel their false hopes to dictate conditions at peace talks. Russia, for its part, can only exercise a certain degree of pressure on Assad on political-military and humanitarian issues. Furthermore, Moscow has no intention to spoil its relations with its two main regional partners, Turkey and Iran, by radically intensifying political pressure on any of them regarding Syria.

As long as Russia still hopes to achieve a negotiated power-sharing solution in Syria through a UN-led process in the foreseeable future, it will genuinely play this game. If Russia loses this hope, it will turn to “Plan B,” although this does not necessarily imply that Russia will drop its UN-centered rhetoric or diplomatic calls for peace. “Plan B” was not Moscow’s preferred option in the first place and, even now, there is still no full consensus about “solving Syria” in Russia’s foreign and security policymaking circles. “Plan B” will certainly have reputational costs for Moscow, especially on the humanitarian, reconstruction, and human rights counts. However, for Russia, which does not have vital interests at stake in Syria, the costs of “Plan B” could be offset by the following:

- It allows Moscow to keep the main political-military dividends from its military engagement – from keeping two bases in Syria to repositioning itself as a global

player and an influential actor in the broader Middle East—while at the same time gradually diminishing its direct engagement (a version of an exit strategy that is short of full disengagement).

- It places a heavier burden on Damascus and Tehran, which play their own games and whose interests in conflict management are not identical to, and may even partly be in conflict with, Russia’s priorities. Because the absence of a proper negotiated settlement radically constrains prospects for international humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Syria, these two may actually end up finding the humanitarian and reconstruction burden to be too heavy for them. Thus, they might start to behave in a more adequate way of integrating core oppositional factions, undertaking political reforms, ensuring a degree of real decentralization/federalization, and improving relations with other regional powers and key international donors.
- It removes the main Syria-related irritators from Russia’s relationship with Turkey (strategically important for reasons far beyond Syria), while at the same time, due to the decrease in Russia’s direct role in Syria, delinking it from the Turkish-Kurdish confrontation.
- It nullifies the chances for the United States in particular and for the West in general to strengthen their strategic and reputational positions in and on Syria.