

Diplomacy and the War in Syria: Individual Interests or Genuine Efforts to Rebuild the State?

Anat Ben Haim and Rob Geist Pinfold

Throughout the Syrian civil war, a number of regional and global actors have embarked on international initiatives that seek a political solution to the conflict. These initiatives differed significantly from each other in terms of their objectives, scope, and the identity of those leading them. This article describes and compares the most prominent international initiatives, assesses the effectiveness of each, and defines the enduring obstacles facing any diplomatic solution. Much has been written about the virtues of “soft power” and one of its leading tools, diplomacy. However, this article argues that in the Syrian civil war, the distribution of “hard power” among the actors involved is what lays the foundations for the future of Syria, rather than any international peace process.

Keywords: Syria, diplomacy, Russia, United States, Israel and its neighbors, United Nations

In Syria today, fighting on the battlefield has assumed a secondary role to political attempts to shape and reconstruct the country. It is already clear that the Assad regime has emerged with the upper hand, and more and more actors, both inside and outside Syria, see this victory as an established fact. This is also true for Israel, which has de facto recognized Assad’s renewed control of the Syrian Golan Heights. By contrast, the influence and power of the opposition and rebel organizations are steadily eroding.

In order to assess possible future directions of a political settlement in Syria, this article examines the main channels of dialogue that have

Anat Ben Haim is a research assistant at INSS. Dr. Rob Geist Pinfold is a Neubauer research associate at INSS.

developed over the years of war in Syria and asks why they have so far not led to a breakthrough. It outlines the central diplomatic initiatives that were formulated to prevent further violence and achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict. The article examines in detail the various political processes, compares their effectiveness, and discusses the implications for Israel.

International Diplomacy: The Geneva Talks and the Vienna Agreement

A short time after the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, various international diplomatic initiatives to stop the violence began to take shape, with the aim of reaching a political solution. However, these processes, which continued in parallel with the fighting, did not bring about significant changes on the ground. Notwithstanding the sincere intentions of some of the international actors involved, over the years the initiatives became less and less relevant. Arguably, these conferences and talks served as a fig leaf, while the stronger actors pursued their goals on the battlefield and shaped the future direction of the country. Among the most prominent diplomatic initiatives were the talks in Geneva under the auspices of the UN, and from 2012 under the leadership of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, in his role as envoy of the UN and the Arab League. In August 2012 Annan resigned as mediator,

after reaching the conclusion that it was impossible to bridge the differences between the parties. In May 2014 his replacement, Algerian diplomat al-Akhdar al-Ibrahimi, also resigned after disparaging the lack of sufficient international involvement in attempts to solve the conflict. In spite of the UN's ineffectiveness, the Italian diplomat Staffan de Mistura was appointed UN Special Envoy to Syria and the Arab League in the summer of 2014. From then until late 2018, de Mistura led the talks in Geneva.¹ In 2019 he was replaced by Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen.²

In 2015 the foreign ministers of 20 countries signed the Vienna Agreement, which included a commitment to bring the Syrian government and the opposition to the negotiating table under the auspices of the UN. Critics of the Vienna talks argued

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that they did not include all the local actors involved in the Syrian civil war, and instead the delegations consisted of too many external parties. Nevertheless, the agreement paved the way for the adoption of Security

Council Resolution 2254 in December 2015, which called for a ceasefire, the formation of a transitional government in Syria, the introduction of a new constitution, elections within 18 months, and the establishment of a non-sectarian democratic government. The UN resolution was accepted by all the external states involved in the conflict, including Russia, but was rejected by the Assad regime. Moreover, Bashar al-Jaafari, head of the Syrian regime's delegation to Geneva, declared that there would be no political progress toward ending the fighting as long as the opposition continued to demand Assad's removal. The Syrian rebel and government delegations refused to speak directly to each other, and the talks took place with de Mistura's mediation.³

Russian-led Initiatives: Astana and Sochi

In tandem with the Geneva process, talks have been underway in Astana (the capital of Kazakhstan) since January 2017, between the leaders of the three state-level actors with arguably the most military and political influence over events in Syria: Russia, Iran, and Turkey. At first, the Astana process was limited to the promotion and supervision of a ceasefire in areas where humanitarian crises had developed. The Astana process represented Russia exploiting the unwillingness of the United States to play a central role in the political process in Syria. Sans major US involvement, Russia was able to establish its status as a leader of the international diplomatic initiatives.⁴

On May 5, 2017 the delegations at Astana signed a memorandum that called for the formation of de-escalation zones within Syria. Russia, Iran, and Turkey were guarantors of the agreement, which represented another attempt to reach a prolonged cessation of hostilities. Four de-escalation zones were created: in Idlib; in the enclave between Hama and Homs; in the enclave to the east of Damascus; and in southern Syria near Dara'a and Quneitra, close to the borders with Israel and Jordan. The declared aims of the agreement were to restrain the intensity and scope of the fighting, relieve the humanitarian distress, and enable refugees to return to their homes. The overall goal was to lay the foundation for a solution to the crisis, while freezing the conflict in sensitive and less stable areas. Concurrently, the actors involved in the Astana process declared their support of a united Syria.⁵

Another Russian initiative to resolve the conflict was the organization and hosting of the Syrian Congress for National Dialogue in Sochi in late January 2018. The congress was an attempt to create a national dialogue

under Russian auspices. The Russians wanted the congress to represent all the political camps involved in the conflict, including prominent opposition groups, the Assad regime, the Kurds, and representatives of the various ethnic and tribal groups. The goal of the congress was to draft a proposal for a new constitution, which would serve as the basis for a political settlement. Other aims announced by Russia included introducing constitutional reforms; setting up a transitional government (which would in fact ensure that Assad remained President); promoting local, parliamentary, and presidential elections in Syria before 2021; and even suggesting a proposal for the Kurds to discuss a kind of federal arrangement granting them partial autonomy, in return for broader support for the Assad regime remaining in power.

Comparisons between the Different Channels

Both the Russian-led political process and the other processes led by the international community were accused of ineffectiveness. The Sochi congress encountered numerous problems, including an invitation to the Kurdish delegates that angered the Turks, and the refusal of Syrian opposition delegates to leave the airport and join the talks (although some of them were finally persuaded to do so by a Turkish delegate). In spite of these problems, the Sochi congress managed to bring together a range of political, ethnic, and religious groups from Syrian society, including supporters and opponents of the regime, to sit around one table and seek a political solution to the crisis. The concluding document announced the formation of a committee of 150 representatives who would draw up a future Syrian constitution, based on mutual understandings. However, even this proposal encountered difficulties, including disagreement over the future political structure of Syria; general opposition by the Syrian government to a new constitution; the future status and involvement of guarantor countries; and the question of who would participate in writing any new or amended constitution. Concurrently, Russia used the Sochi congress to call for an end to the violence, but aerial bombardments under its auspices continued to kill civilians.⁶ For opposition groups and Western countries, this confirmed their concerns that the Russian-led congress was a smokescreen intended to buy time for the pro-Assad coalition forces (Russia, Iran and its proxies) to defeat opposition forces.

In terms of achieving results on the ground, it appears that the Astana talks were more effective than the Geneva talks. This is primarily because the Astana talks were led by the countries involved in the fighting, and as

such, these actors wield significant influence over the various players in Syria: Russia and Iran are patrons of the Assad regime, and Turkey is an ally of the rebel groups that are not part of the Salafist jihadi movement. Moreover, the Astana talks set several key precedents: (a) they facilitated cooperation between Moscow and Ankara and a thaw in bilateral ties; (b) they legitimized Iranian political involvement within Syria, on top to its military activity; and (c) they brought about a change in the nature and structure of the opposition delegation to the various diplomatic initiatives. For the first time, the opposition delegation was composed of forces actually present in Syria, rather than representatives without influence based mainly outside the country.

The Assad regime opposed the Geneva process, but under Russian pressure agreed to cooperate with the Astana talks and the Sochi congress. The Russians claim that they invited the United States to join these talks (a US representative was sent to Astana as an observer), and during the G20 Economic Conference in Hamburg in July 2017, President Putin received the support of President Trump for the creation of a de-escalation zone in southern Syria. In June 2018 representatives of the three countries at Astana met in Geneva to lay the foundations for a committee to amend the Syrian constitution. UN Special Envoy de Mistura was also present at this meeting, and announced that a list of candidates for the committee had been drawn up, and that preliminary understandings were reached. Thus Russia's coordinated efforts to recruit additional actors and increase its influence on events were more successful at Astana than at the Sochi talks.⁷

So far the original goals of the Geneva talks have not been realized, including a new constitution and elections. The lack of progress in the Geneva talks is not just the result of Western weakness compared to continued Russian and Iranian entrenchment in the Syrian conflict, but also due to the UN's helplessness because of significant differences in the positions of the various actors involved. The opposition is characterized by a large number of actors with diverse interests and agendas, and the disputes between the opposition delegates and the government have focused on the future character of Syria.

On the other hand, the decisions taken at Astana have directly affected events in Syria. This is illustrated by the establishment of de-escalation zones and checkpoints manned by Russian military police, the deployment of Turkish troops around Idlib, and the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Congress. Yet even these decisions have at times served mainly to advance

the goals of the pro-Assad coalition led by Russia and Iran, and have tended to change according to their respective operational needs on the ground. For example, when Russia decided that the timing was right for an attack in southern Syria, it announced that the de-escalation zone there was no longer in effect. Therefore, although it can be argued that the Astana and Sochi channels are more effective than the talks in Geneva or Vienna, it is doubtful whether any diplomatic process led by Russia will achieve an even-handed resolution to the conflict. Instead, the Russian-led talks tend to focus on legitimizing the military achievements of the Assad regime, by providing a diplomatic and multi-national stamp of approval. Concurrently, it appears that the military actions of the pro-Assad coalition, rather than any negotiations, are determining the future outlook for Syria.

A decisive point of friction between the parties involved in the diplomatic efforts is the question of which channel should lead the political process. While the West supported the UN-led Geneva process, Russia tried to push the Astana process and the Sochi congress as alternative channels under its full control, even though it itself was part of the Geneva process. Russia wanted to retain the lion's share of influence over events. Nevertheless, the Syrian opposition is divided over its willingness to cooperate with Russia, arguing that Moscow is only interested in securing the future of the Assad regime. Moreover, the government and the rebels have never talked directly with each other, in any diplomatic forum.

The Assad regime does not feel committed to the Geneva talks, and tends rather to support Astana and Sochi. Years of warfare have weakened the work of the UN, partly because of the repeated use by the Russians of their veto, in order to undermine any Security Council resolutions that attempt to address the conflict in Syria. The meeting in Geneva under the auspices of the UN in December 2018 between Staffan de Mistura and the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran, and Turkey was a symbolic victory for the Astana process. This is because the UN diplomats leading the Geneva process learned that even their own initiatives will to a large extent play second fiddle to the talks at Astana, which wield decisive influence on the ground and therefore also at the negotiating table.⁸

The Obstacles to a Political Solution

Several issues have frustrated and continue to obstruct a political agreement. First, there is the question of which rebel organizations are legitimate and which constitute Salafist jihadi terror groups that deserve no part

in the political process. Disagreements on this issue have led Turkey to strengthen its ties to organizations that Russia and the West have defined as terrorists. Similarly, the Assad regime and Russia have bombed groups they considered terrorists, while signing ceasefire agreements with other rebel groups. Moreover, throughout the civil war, rebel organizations have united and split frequently, while Salafist jihadi elements have actually grown stronger in the face of the weakness of the less extreme rebel groups, such as the Free Syrian Army.

Second, there is the question of Assad's future: until his regime strengthened its military position on the ground, most Syrian opposition elements, as well as Turkey, Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, and most Western countries demanded Assad's removal from the presidency, as a condition for a future settlement. The Syrian government (with Russian and Iranian backing) was not prepared to compromise on this matter.⁹ However, the opposition has recently moderated its stance on this issue, due to changes in the balance of forces. Turkey has also demonstrated a more moderate line toward the Assad regime, and the Turkish Foreign Minister announced that his country was ready to work with Bashar al-Assad if he were to emerge the winning candidate in free democratic elections.

For their part, the Arab countries, which suspended Syria's membership in the Arab League in 2011, have showed an increased willingness to bring President Assad back into the fold of Arab states, by proposing a series of confidence building measures. In September 2018, at the fringes of the UN General Assembly, there was a meeting between the foreign ministers of Syria and Bahrain, which included embraces and mutual flattery. Since then, Bahrain has announced that like the United Arab Emirates, it is working to reopen its embassy in the Syrian capital; a high level Jordanian delegation visited Damascus; and in December 2018, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir made the first visit to Syria by leader of an Arab country since the start of the war, while a Syrian delegation visited Cairo.¹⁰ These events suggest that the survival of the Assad regime may now be less of an obstacle to a diplomatic agreement. However, some Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are still unwilling to help reconstruct Syria and stabilize its government while Iran continues to entrench itself there.¹¹

A third obstacle is the dispute over the future character of Syria. The United States and Russia support a united country with a decentralized government and autonomy for certain communities, such as the Kurds in the northeast. The Assad regime and Iran, however, want a strong

government that is even more centralized than before the outbreak of the civil war. Turkey supports autonomy for the Sunnis in northern Syria, but opposes autonomy for the Kurds, and in March 2018 even captured the Kurdish Afrin district. The Assad regime has not agreed to proposals from the Geneva and Sochi talks, which concern the division of government powers, the establishment of a transitional government, powers to be granted to the opposition and voting rights for Syrian refugees, reforms in the state security apparatus, a long term ceasefire, and free elections.

Finally, the main dispute that has hampered the political process is the question of foreign forces in Syria. Russia seeks a fairly rapid withdrawal of foreign forces, while Iran wants to continue entrenching its military and political presence in Syria, maintaining its proxies – the Shiite militias and Hezbollah – and furthering its aims of changing the demographics in areas that are essential to it, such as along the Syria-Lebanon border. Meanwhile, Turkey has entrenched itself in northern Syria and worked to limit the spread of areas under Kurdish control. Turkey has established closely supervised Sunni autonomy in areas that it perceives as essential to its national interests, such as Afrin. Turkey is also considering extending this arrangement to Idlib. Because of the expected American withdrawal from Syria and its possible abandonment of its Kurdish allies, it is likely that Turkey will strengthen its hold in northern Syria, and it is not expected to withdraw in the near future.

What to Expect? More of the Same

As the Assad regime continues to retake control of rebel territory in Syria, it will probably adopt a more inflexible position, in order to deny the opposition any political power and influence. The Assad regime has even managed to divide the rebel organizations, by incorporating the less extreme ones within the regime's forces. However, it appears that this policy will extend for a limited period only, until the regime can establish its rule and settle accounts with the rebels. In terms of internal politics, the main lesson the Assad regime has learned is that it must strengthen its internal security forces and establish local militias of supporters, with Iranian assistance and direction, and thereby prevent any future insurgencies. In other words, the regime is likely to tighten control and reject any diplomatic efforts calling on it to become more open to active participation by Syrian citizens in the political system. With the help of its allies, the Assad regime will probably exploit the vacuum left by the American withdrawal, and with the help of

Iranian directed militias, continue to expand its control of regions in the Syrian desert and near the border between Syria and Iraq. This will give the regime a stronger grip on the territory and thus make it unwilling to accept any political compromise or introduce future reforms. Changes in the policy of Arab states also put the regime in a comfortable position between two hawkish camps (led by Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran on the other) that are both interested in closer ties with the Assad regime.

Another failure of the political process is that the three countries intervening in Syria, the members of the Astana forum, are growing further apart in their views over the future of Syria. Turkey, which is about to lose its influence in Idlib (the last stronghold of Sunni rebel elements) as the regime prepares to retake territory there, feels betrayed by Russia and Iran, which prevented it from deriving the maximum benefit from the talks between the umbrella organization of the rebels under its influence, the National Liberation Front, and the umbrella organization of the Salafist jihadi rebels, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Following the US withdrawal from Syria, Turkey will probably strengthen its grip in the north and adopt harsher measures against the Kurds, particularly since President Trump declared that President Erdogan is someone who can continue the struggle against the Islamic State. In these circumstances, Turkey's ambitions to set up a security zone under its control along the Syrian side of the border seem more achievable than ever. Thus it is not clear if, when, and how Turkey will withdraw its forces from northern Syria – something that will make the political process even more complex and contribute to the divergence in the positions of the Astana countries over Syria's future.¹²

Russia and Iran also have different views on the future of Syria. The Iranians want to reinforce their long term influence in Syria with the help of a strong, central government led by Bashar al-Assad. This would allow them to maintain their strongholds, and perhaps even extend their control in the Syrian desert regions and along the Syria-Iraq border, once the US forces evacuate the al-Tanf base. On the other hand, Russia believes that in order to maintain stability, all foreign forces must leave Syria (apart from Russia, which has an agreement with the regime to continue to maintain its bases along the coast). In addition, Russia asserts that it is essential to consider the

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balance of forces within the country and give more power to the regional and local councils that manage the daily lives of the population. Thus once the Assad regime takes control of the Idlib district with the backing of the Russian-Iranian coalition, the Astana forum will likely have completed its role in the management of the war.

The Geneva channel will continue to focus on the reorganization of the Syrian political system, and on finding a formula for national consensus and extending participation in the political process. At the same time, this channel will be engaged in Syrian reconstruction and the return of the refugees. Here too problems are expected, due to the Assad regime's unwillingness to share political power or work toward the return of the Sunni refugees, and due to the difficulty in recruiting Arab and Western support for rebuilding Syria, as long as the Assad regime controls the country and Iran's influence remains unconstrained. As such, little progress can be expected from the Geneva talks, which from the start has not been very effective. Notwithstanding the eulogy delivered against the Astana process in early December 2018 by United States Special Representative to Syria James Jeffrey, the three countries leading the Astana process have been invited to participate in the international discussions at the UN on the future of Syria, at a time that the US is withdrawing. Because of the polarization among the parties, when de Mistura met with the foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey, and Russia in December 2018, they were unable to reach agreement over the composition of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The only real chance of rebuilding Syria will be for Russia and the United States to find a way to cooperate, and seek to mutually reinforce openness by incorporating opposition elements into the political system. But in spite of the potential for a shared role in the future of Syria – since both Russia and the US advocate a more politically decentralized Syrian state, and both want the withdrawal of foreign forces as soon as possible – it appears that the chances of any substantive cooperation are nil. The fundamental commitment of both the Russia and the US to regional players with opposing interests prevents them acting on a mutually cooperative basis, and the result is a weakened political process. The withdrawal of the US from Syria will not increase the potential for Russia-US cooperation, because the exit of US forces will only further erode its regional status and the perception that it has abandoned local allies.

Implications for Israel

Israel announced that it would not intervene in the Syrian civil war as long as it was not under direct threat, since it has no territorial designs over the country. In fact, Israel has shunned all diplomatic processes that attempt to shape the future of Syria, and has de facto accepted Assad and his government as the ruling party. Israel did not manage to make its non-intervention conditional on its continued control of the Israeli-controlled side of the Golan Heights, the formation of a security coordination mechanism, or the creation of channels for dialogue to prevent accidents and reduce tension. Nor did Israel try to influence the Assad regime's position on Iranian involvement in Syria. Even if it were invited, Israel is not interested in being part of the Geneva forum, in case the question of returning the Golan Heights comes up, particularly considering Staffan de Mistura's declarations concerning the "withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria." Israel considers this position as putting the legitimacy of its presence in the western Golan Heights at risk.

The main Israeli objective at this time is to block the entrenchment of Iran and its proxies in Syria, while preventing the development and transfer of strategic capabilities and advanced military infrastructures to the Syrian government or to Hezbollah. Israel has little choice but to accept the continued survival of the Assad regime, at least for the foreseeable future, with responsibility for seeking stability and minimizing the chances for the return of Salafist jihadi groups to the northern border. In the context of Syrian reconstruction, Arab and Western countries are making their aid conditional on Iranian withdrawal. However, due to continued Iranian entrenchment on the ground and with the political process effectively led by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, this may not be a realistic demand. Israel understands that it has been left to face Iranian efforts alone (mainly due to the US withdrawal), and thus must continue its military activity with tactical and kinetic actions, while promoting bilateral talks with Russia and the US to achieve its goals and reduce friction as much as possible. Within the political sphere, though, there does not seem to be room for Israel at the international negotiating table, nor any Israeli inclination to be involved.

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In conclusion, the various diplomatic processes affecting the situation in Syria will probably be more influenced by events on the ground than vice versa. Concurrently, many diplomatic initiatives have served to veil the military actions of the pro-Assad coalition thinly, while maintaining the appearance of their participation in international processes. Diplomatic initiatives will likely continue to encounter difficulties and be ineffective, and ultimately the future of Syria will be determined by the distribution of military assets on the ground. Therefore, Israel must continue to maintain its deterrence and work toward realizing its interests, without pinning its hopes on the diplomatic sphere.

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