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Issue Brief

Moscow Declaration: Giving Peace a Chance

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December 20, 2016 will go down in history as a memorable day in the narration of the resolution of the conflict in Syria. In a meeting held in Moscow, Russia, Turkey and Iran adopted a declaration on the immediate steps to promote a settlement of the Syrian crisis.

But the fall of the northern city to Syrian government forces and their allies has opened a new chapter in a power struggle that extends far beyond the country's borders. Many wept as they left their city behind for a new and uncertain life in the countryside. After receiving a message of congratulations on reaching safety, one man said: "I'm not sure if you should congratulate me for getting displaced safely."

After the meeting, top officials of the Russian, Iranian and Turkish governments issued a joint eight-point statement of principles calling for the extension of a ceasefire throughout Syria and a negotiated settlement between the Syrian government and its opponents. The tripartite was hailed by Russian's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, as a way to "overcome the stagnation in efforts on the Syrian settlement." The comment was a clear gibe at the United States absence from the Moscow meetings.

However, it was made clear that the triumvirate was open for all. The Kremlin said that it would welcome all interested parties at the negotiating table. "We are not close for contacts with all other countries. We are inviting them to join the processes that, as we believe, have a positive potential," Lavrov noted.

However, the Iranian camp had reservations. Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan stated that Saudi Arabia's participation in the Syrian peace process was impossible as Riyadh is seeking to oust President Bashar Assad.

"They [Saudi Arabia] are seeking to topple the existing regime. No talks should be allowed with those who are eager to do it. We must give them a decisive answer," Dehghan said in an interview with RT television commenting on the peace process in Syria.

The Iranians believe that Saudi Arabia will sit down at the negotiating table with an agenda to unseat the political leadership in Syria. Such a party cannot in fact contribute positively to the peace process.

The three countries agreed to take on the role of guarantors to facilitate the process preserving the territorial integrity of Syria and spreading the cessation of hostilities to all parts of the country. The declaration was a symbolic promise that the efforts by the three parties would continue. The document

was signed by the three countries' foreign and defence chiefs at the meeting in Moscow. The meeting in Moscow was convened on the basis of the stunning defeat delivered to the nearly six-year-old US-orchestrated war for regime change in Syria when Syrian forces, backed by Russia and Iran, retook eastern Aleppo, the last urban stronghold of the Islamist militias that served as US proxy forces in the fight against the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The tripartite talks were held after Aleppo had been retaken from the militants to change the situation in the war-torn country. Russia, Iran and Turkey are the leading pertinent actors who have heavy influence on ground in Syria. This is because all three are actively present on the ground and can directly influence events in real time. This was demonstrated by the recent ceasefire and evacuation deal for Aleppo that was brokered by Russia and Turkey and saw around 35,000 civilians and rebels being evacuated from the embattled city. Plus, the trio's influence on local actors ensures that almost all sides of the Syrian conflict are covered except for the Islamist extremists and Kurds. In a way, this again reaffirms the principle of preserving the territorial integrity of the Syrian state as both the Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds want to alter Syria's territorial boundaries. Hence, the trio's coming together bodes well for Syria.

Relations between Ankara and Moscow have been on an upward trend. According to Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik, Turkey will do everything needed for cooperation with Russia on Syria. The progress has also been made against the background of worsening ties between Turkey and the US and its NATO allies. Ankara has been angered by what it sees as lukewarm condemnation by its Western allies of the abortive July 15-16 coup. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in November that he was disillusioned with the US policies in his interview with CBS 60 Minutes. Added to this is the fact that Ankara is mulling over the possibility of joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The talks also took place under the shadow of the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey but the killing did not seem to hamper discussions.

The relations between Russia and Iran have also grown warmer since the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the Iran nuclear deal, became effective. President Vladimir Putin visited Iran in November 2015 – his first visit after 2007.

Moreover, this successful initiative provides an impetus to expand these efforts to other parts of Syria. The Moscow Declaration highlights the failure of the US and the UN to get a credible peace process off the ground. Moreover, the US-led coalition has failed to make any significant gains during offensives in

Mosul and Raqqa against the background of quick and spectacular success of Russia-supported forces retaking Aleppo. The Aleppo victory greatly diminishes the US status as power broker.

The significance of the declaration signed in Moscow on December 20, 2016 is hard to underestimate. This is an international effort undertaken by the states that have forces on the ground in Syria; a factor that can actually bring about some real change. With Aleppo retaken and the future policies coordinated, peace appears to have a chance in the war-torn and long-suffered country.

The US has said that it was not worried about being left out of the discussion. A State Department spokesman said it welcomed any solutions that “lead to a reduction in bloodshed...whether or not we’re at the table”.

However it is safe to say that the three parties joining together on Syria indicates a major shift in the balance of power with the US influence further declining. According to Lavrov, the "Moscow troika" is the most efficient format to resolve the Syrian crisis.

The latest initiative has a far greater chance of success than anything that has come out of the US-UN so far. Hopefully, the Russia-Iran-Turkey trilateral can finally bring peace for the Syrian people as this humanitarian crisis has surpassed all depths of brutality. The smoking rubbles and mass graves of East Aleppo are enough to warrant a permanent resolution to this grave crisis. It is high time that we give peace a chance.