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Issue Brief

Third Round of Astana Talks: A Gordian Knot in the Making?

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The Syrian conflict marked a grim anniversary on March 15, as the country entered its seventh year of civil war.



On March 14, 2017, representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey - the Syrian ceasefire guarantor states - met in Astana for two-day trilateral consultations on the Syrian conflict. The Astana talks, brokered by Russia and Turkey, are centered on reaching a cease-fire in Syria and getting humanitarian relief to millions of suffering civilians. They run parallel to the UN mediated political talks in Geneva aimed at ending Syria's civil war.

The talks in Kazakhstan concluded without any practical discussions taking place, after the rebels boycotted the meeting altogether. The only tangible outcome from the third round of talks was an agreement between Russia, Turkey and Iran, to meet again in early May 2017. The next round of talks will take place on May 3-4. Preliminary expert consultations will take place on April 18-19 in Tehran.¹

In what has become known as the Astana Process, Russia, Iran and Turkey reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening and consolidating the ceasefire in Syria. The Russian delegation was headed by special presidential envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentye, Iran was represented by Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Jaber Ansari and Turkey was represented by Foreign Ministry Deputy Undersecretary Sedat Onal. The Damascus delegation was headed by Syria's Envoy to the United Nations Bashar Jaafari. Delegations from the United Nations were also in attendance. Russian-Turkish and Russian-Iranian consultations also took place on the side-lines of the talks.

The question of why the Syrian armed opposition did not attend the meeting in Kazakhstan was subject to much recrimination. In the week leading up to the talks, the rebels had announced that they would not attend the Astana talks because of repeated cease-fire violations by the government. Mohamed Alloush, the head of the Syrian opposition delegation at the first round of talks stated that the decision to boycott was taken because the rebel demands were not being addressed: "The Russians did not abide

¹ <http://astanatimes.com/2017/03/astana-process-guarantor-states-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-syrian-ceasefire/>

by their promises. They didn't release prisoners, they didn't stop the bombing, they didn't stop the forced displacement."² On the other hand, Syrian government envoy Bashar al-Jaafari blamed Turkey for the opposition boycott saying that, "when one of the three guarantors breaks their commitment - and I mean Turkey - this means that Turkey must be the one that is asked about the non-attendance or participation of these armed groups,"³.

Commenting on the boycott, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the reasons the opposition offered were "unconvincing"⁴ and dubbed the absence as a mere "misunderstanding"⁵. However, whatever the actual reason may be, the talks still took place as outlined in UNSC resolution 2254.

The issues on the agenda for this fresh round of talks were; measures to strengthen ceasefire, release of detainees and possible cooperation on demining of Palmyra⁶. A proposal was formulated on exchanging prisoners in Syria and the signing of a deal on setting up a group for monitoring ceasefire, composed of Iran, Russia and Turkey, which would be further subordinated to the UN. Simultaneously, a wide range of other issues apart from the main agenda were also discussed. These included an exchange of information on reports of ceasefire violations, provisions about districts that joined the regime of the cessation of hostilities, exchange of information on prisoners and talks about ensuring the delineation between groups of armed opposition and terrorist organisations⁷.

The first round of Astana talks on Syria were held on January 23-24, 2017 and resulted in a Moscow-Tehran-Ankara agreement⁸ on the establishment of a trilateral mechanism to monitor the ceasefire in Syria. The second round of the Astana talks took place on February 15-16, with the participants agreeing to set up a ceasefire monitoring group, encompassing Iran, Russia and Turkey, that would report to the United Nations.⁹

² <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/astana-talks-marred-syrian-armed-opposition-boycott-170314165629045.html>

³ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-government-says-turkey-breaks-commitments-rebels-boycott-talks-496713813>

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks-lavrov-idUSKBN16L10F?il=0>

⁵ <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201703141051560806-syria-lavrov-opposition-astana/>

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⁷ <http://astanatimes.com/2017/03/astana-process-guarantor-states-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-syrian-ceasefire/>

⁸ <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/82395219/>

⁹ <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2017/02/17/syria-astana-talks-end-without-final-statement-ceasefire/>

Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Akylbek Kamaldinov summarised this best when he stated at the end of the talks, “The way is still long and full of hurdles. However, it is only our unity that will help fight terrorism and violent extremism”¹⁰.

Unity being the key word... and the most elusive.

Even though no significant breakthroughs took place this time around, it is still heartening to see that talks on this issue are still proceeding despite minor hiccups. It is, however, imperative to note that the opposition is only weakening its own position if it boycotts such discussions because this will be viewed as a hindrance to peace. Hence, each party must make it a point to attend every convention regarding this issue so that each side has a fair chance to get their points across in a civil manner. A conducive diplomatic environment will aid in a speedy settlement. Snubbing the present process will only harden what is already a tough Gordian Knot.

¹⁰ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/aggregator>