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Backgrounder

Astana Talks: A Prelude to Peace in Syria

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Summary

The Astana talks were initiated when the Geneva talks proved unable to achieve the desired political solution and remained stalled for a year due to the Syrian opposition's demand for a ceasefire and a stop to the advance being made by Syrian government and Russian forces towards Aleppo as a pre-condition for further participation in talks. While the Geneva talks have since resumed with the eighth round scheduled for 28 November 2017, the Astana process has contributed to the reduction in violence and the functioning of de-escalation zones. By focusing on the cessation of violence and humanitarian issues, the Astana talks would hopefully serve as a prelude to peace in Syria.

One year after the Syrian crisis began in 2011, talks to find a political solution were held in Geneva under the aegis of the United Nations. Seven rounds of talks have been held so far and the eighth round is scheduled to commence on November 28.¹ While the United States and Russia are the major players in these talks, the Arab League, China, European Union, France, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Kingdom are all participants. Until now, however, the lack of a united Syrian opposition,² the negative role of regional and international actors³ and the reluctance of the Assad regime and anti-regime forces to agree to a mutually acceptable solution⁴ have precluded a positive outcome at these talks. In addition, the non-inclusion of key regional players like Iran has also contributed to the absence of a positive outcome.⁵ A final hurdle has been the Syrian regime's reluctance to agree to the opposition's demand for a transitional government without Assad.⁶

Meanwhile, beginning in January 2017, a relatively less ambitious process focused on attaining a cessation of hostilities, rather than the forging of a political solution, emerged under the leadership of Russia, Iran and Turkey. These talks have been held at Astana, Kazakhstan. While Kazakhstan has no direct stakes in the conflict, it enjoys the trust of the Assad regime as well as of the opposition forces, in addition to being close to Russia. And, earlier in 2015, it had hosted two rounds of talks between Syrian opposition groups. During the first round of the Astana talks, Kazakhstan made it clear that it is only providing a platform for inter-Syrian

¹ Patryk Pawlak, "Mapping The Future Of Syria: State Of Play And Options," *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 23 March 2017, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2017\)599362](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2017)599362)

² *ibid*

³ Kofi Annan, "My Departing Advice on How to Save Syria," *Financial Times*, 02 August 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/b00b6ed4-dbc9-11e1-8d78-00144feab49a>

⁴ Rifaat Al Badawi, "De Mistura's Failure in Geneva Peace Talks," *The Syrian Observer*, 07 March 2017, http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/Commentary/32429/De_Mistura_Failure_Geneva_Peace_Talks

⁵ "Russia FM stresses Iran's influential role in Syria peace process," *Press TV*, 24 May 2017, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/05/24/522986/Russia-Iran-Syria>; "French president stresses Iran's influential role in Syria peace efforts," *Press TV*, 20 September 2017, <http://217.218.67.231/Detail/2017/09/20/535801/syria-France-Iran>

⁶ "Assad Says Syria Transitional Government Must Include Regime, Opposition," *World Agence France-Presse*, 30 March 2016, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/assad-says-syria-transitional-government-must-include-regime-opposition-1292312>; "Assad: changing Syrian government will prolong war", *Deutsche Welle* (DW), 18 December 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/assad-changing-syrian-government-will-prolong-war/a-18928324>

negotiations and will not get involved⁷ in the process, although it subsequently declared its willingness to send forces to Syria if called upon to do so by the United Nations.⁸

The Astana talks were initiated when the Geneva talks proved unable to achieve the desired political solution and remained stalled for a year (from February 2016 to February 2017) after the end of the third round because the opposition demanded a ceasefire and a stop to the advance being made by Syrian government and Russian forces towards Aleppo as a pre-condition for further participation in talks.⁹ Since the resumption of the fourth round of the Geneva talks in February 2017, three successive rounds were held in March, May and July 2017. The eighth round is scheduled to commence on 28 November 2017.

The beginning of the Astana talks symbolized a geo-political shift. While the Geneva talks were spearheaded by the United States and other western powers,¹⁰ the Astana talks are being led by Russia, Turkey and Iran as guarantors. The US has attended the Astana talks only as an observer. These talks signified a shift from US-led efforts the primary aim of which was the removal of Assad to the Russian-led effort focused on humanitarian issues and bringing about a stable ceasefire.

Maintaining that the Astana talks are complementary to the Geneva talks,¹¹ the UN as well as the troika of guarantors have expressed the hope that the Astana process

⁷ “Astana process: Kazakhstan will not be involved in talks – Vasilenko,” *Kazinform*, 23 January 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/astana-process-kazakhstan-will-not-be-involved-in-talks-vasilenko_a2991731

⁸ “Kazakhstan denies it's in talks to send troops to Syria,” *Reuters*, 23 June 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kazakhstan/kazakhstan-denies-its-in-talks-to-send-troops-to-syria-idUSKBN19E0I1>; “Kazakhstan may send peacekeepers to Syria, if UN makes such decision – Nazarbayev,” *Kazinform*, 14 September 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-may-send-peacekeepers-to-syria-if-un-makes-such-decision-nazarbayev_a3065000

⁹ Douglas de Quadros Rocha, Isabela Souza Julio, Patrícia Graeff Machry, “The Peace Talks On The Syrian Conflict: Main Developments And Differences Between The Vienna (2015) And Geneva Iii (2016) Meetings,” *Bol. Conj. Nerint*, Porto Alegre, v.1 n.1, p. 1-95, July 2016, <https://www.ufrgs.br/nerint/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Boletim-v1n1-peacetalkssyria.pdf>

¹⁰ The US supported the Syrian opposition’s demand of political transition and removal of Assad which formed part of the Geneva communique and other UNSC resolutions. The US along with other Western powers encouraged its regional Sunni allies and funded the Syrian opposition. The US did not have a formal role in leading the talks but indirectly influenced the outcome by providing support to the Syrian opposition. Gareth Porter, “Obama’s Syria Policy and the Illusion of US Power in the Middle East,” *Middle East Eye*, 09 October 2016, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/10/09/obamas-syria-policy-and-illusion-us-power-middle-east>

¹¹ “Transcript of the press conference by the UN Special Envoy for Syria in Astana,” *The United Nations Office at Geneva*, 05 July 2017,

will pave the way for eventual peace in Syria.¹² The Astana talks have ensured the active participation of the Assad regime by replacing the phrase ‘transitional body’ mentioned in the Geneva Communique issued in June 2012 with ‘political process’ in the Astana Communique, thus gaining the regime’s confidence as well as agreement to discuss ‘everything’.¹³ Moreover, with the Astana talks emphasizing on the need to fight against ISIS terror, Syrian opposition groups also agreed to participate since they did not wish to be seen as aligned with the ISIS.

First Round of Astana Talks

At the first round of the Astana talks in January 2017, the three guarantor states aimed to consolidate the ceasefire that had come into force on December 30, 2016 by addressing the challenges of reducing violence and minimising violations of ceasefire, building confidence among the parties, fighting jointly against ISIS/Daesh and al-Nusra and jumpstarting the peace dialogue.¹⁴ It was attended by the Syrian government, the Syrian opposition including 20 different groups, delegates from the three guarantor states, the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura, and the US Ambassador to Kazakhstan as an observer. This round of talks inspired optimism as, for the first time, regime and opposition representatives sat together for face-to-face discussions.¹⁵

The joint statement issued by the guarantor states at the end of the talks noted that the effort is a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process with the aim of contributing to global efforts to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254.¹⁶A

[https://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear_en\)/A96CFEC633456E64C1258155002CF5D8?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/A96CFEC633456E64C1258155002CF5D8?OpenDocument)

¹² Alexander Aksenyonok, “Intra-Syrian Reconciliation: Between Astana and Geneva,” *Valdai*, 14 November 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/syrian-reconciliation-between-astana-and-geneva/>

¹³ Patryk Pawlak. "Mapping The Future Of Syria: State Of Play And Options," *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 23 March 2017, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2017\)599362](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2017)599362)

¹⁴ “Astana joint statement by Iran, Russia, Turkey: in full,” *Al-Jazeera*, 24 January 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-joint-statement-iran-russia-turkey-full-170124133951063.html>

¹⁵ “First day of Syrian settlement talks inspired careful optimism,” *Kazinform*, 23 January 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/first-day-of-syrian-settlement-talks-inspired-careful-optimism_a2991997

¹⁶ “Astana joint statement by Iran, Russia, Turkey: in full,” *Al-Jazeera*, 24 January 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/astana-joint-statement-iran-russia-turkey-full-170124133951063.html>

trilateral mechanism¹⁷ involving the three guarantor states of Russia, Iran and Turkey to ensure full compliance with the December 2016 ceasefire was also established. The talks generated diverse reactions among the participants: while the Syrian government appreciated the outcome, the opposition refused to sign the final document. Yahya al Aridi, Advisor to the Syrian opposition group, insisted that Iran remove its forces from Syrian territory if it wants the restoration of peace.¹⁸ He stated that the wellbeing of Syrian citizens should be the first priority of these talks and added it is a feeling among some opposition delegates that some participants in the talks including guarantor states are pursuing their own interests.¹⁹ In addition, the Syrian Kurdish Self Defence forces questioned the outcome of the talks²⁰ and emphasized that the crisis can be resolved only if representatives of all Syrian nationalities and religions are consulted. For his part, UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura asserted the need to engage the Arab League in the talks.²¹

The Second Round

The second round of the Astana talks held in mid-February 2017 was marked by expressions of mutual distrust by the Assad regime and the opposition. While the Assad regime accused Turkey of supporting terrorist groups in Raqqa,²² the opposition complained of truce violations by the regime forces. In addition to the members who were part of the first round of talks, the second round saw Jordan attending as an observer. Measures to stabilize the situation in violence struck areas including the framing of rules for a joint operation group, taking steps to consolidate the ceasefire regime and adoption of a document on the establishment of a ceasefire

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ "Syrian Opposition Refused to Sign Final Astana Process Document," *Kazinform*, 24 January 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/syrian-opposition-refused-to-sign-final-astana-process-document_a2992258

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ "Snubbed Syrian Kurds reject 'any decision' from Astana peace-talks," *The New Arab*, 24 January 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/1/23/snubbed-syrian-kurds-reject-any-decision-from-syria-peace-talks>

²¹ "Arabic countries should be involved in Syria talks, de Mistura," *Kazinform*, 25 January 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/arabic-countries-should-be-involved-in-syria-talks-de-mistura_a2992632

²² "Bashar Al Assad Interview: Western Nations are Supporting the Terrorists. US Counter-Terrorism Campaign is Bogus," *Global Research*, 04 July 2017, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/bashar-al-assad-interview-western-nations-are-supporting-the-terrorists-us-counter-terrorism-campaign-is-bogus/5533940>

monitoring group were the issues discussed in this round.²³ Although no final statement was signed at the end of this round of talks as well, the guarantors announced the creation of a joint trilateral monitoring group as part of the trilateral mechanism established in the first round of talks to ensure that all parties adhere to the terms of the December 2016 ceasefire. In this round, a mechanism for exchange of captives and dead bodies was agreed upon as a confidence building measure. And importantly, this round established the relevance of Astana talks as a precursor to the Geneva talks by providing momentum to the resumption of the latter.²⁴

The Third Round

The third round of talks in mid-March was boycotted by the rebels who accused the regime of violating the ceasefire agreed to in December 2016.²⁵ The talks were extended for a day in anticipation of representation by the North and South front opposition as well as by the Free Syrian army,²⁶ but finally there was no representation from the Syrian opposition. The North Front armed opposition is funded by Turkey and South Front is funded by Jordan.²⁷ The significance of this

²³ “Astana to host new high-level meeting within Astana Process on Feb 15-16,” *Kazinform*, 12 February 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/astana-to-host-new-high-level-meeting-within-astana-process-on-feb-15-16_a2998456

²⁴ Gareth Bayley, “Astana process outcomes may lay good foundation for UN-led Intra-Syrian consultations in Geneva,” *Kazinform*, 13 February 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/astana-process-outcomes-may-lay-good-foundation-for-un-led-intra-syrian-consultations-in-geneva-gareth-bayley_a2998785; “Second Round of Astana Talks Yields Pact on Syria Ceasefire Monitoring,” *Sputnik International*, 17 February 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201702171050772014-second-round-astana-talks-document/>

²⁵ When Tahrir al Sham suicide bombers attacked Syrian military security in Homs, the regime retaliated by bombing rebel controlled Waer area of Syria. John Irish, Stephanie Nebehay, Tom Miles, “Bombings, air strikes in Syria rattle Geneva peace talks,” *Reuters*, 25 February 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/bombings-air-strikes-in-syria-rattle-geneva-peace-talks-idUSKBN16405J>

²⁶ “Astana talks extended for one day due to opposition arrival,” *Kazinform*, 15 March 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/astana-talks-extended-for-one-day-due-to-opposition-arrival_a3008237

²⁷ “Who backs whom in the Syrian conflict,” *The Guardian*, 02 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/oct/09/who-backs-whom-in-the-syrian-conflict>

round lay in Iran officially becoming the third guarantor of the December 2016 ceasefire.²⁸

The talks ended inconclusively with all sides agreeing to meet again in May.²⁹ The guarantor states discussed ways to implement the agreements reached in previous rounds, resolve military issues, improve the humanitarian situation and pledged to expand trilateral cooperation. This round of talks reviewed the status of the ceasefire, the modalities of establishing working groups on the Syrian constitution and issues related to the exchange of detained and imprisoned people, the creation of a single map showing the location of terrorist and armed groups like ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, and addressed the issue of demining UNESCO world heritage sites.³⁰

The Fourth Round

The fourth round of talks, which took place in May 2017, aimed to demarcate the de-escalation zones in Syria. While this was welcomed by the regime, the rebels perceived it as an attempt to divide the Syrian people on the basis of internal differences. The memorandum on the establishment of de-escalation zones was signed by the guarantor states and the proposed zones included the provinces of Idlib, Latakia, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Dara, Quneitra and Ghouta.³¹ De-escalation zones including security belts were created as a temporary measure for six months, to be extended by the guarantor states in consensus. The aim was to bring about the cessation of hostilities, the promotion of rapid and safe access to humanitarian aid,

²⁸ “Kazakh MFA’s statement on outcomes of Third International Meeting on Syria,” *Kazinform*, 17 March 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/kazakh-mfa-s-statement-on-outcomes-of-third-international-meeting-on-syria_a3008747

²⁹ Dana Omirgazy, “Little Progress in Syria Talks but Negotiators Agree to Continue Astana Meetings,” *Astana Times*, 22 July 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/At127.pdf>

³⁰ “Kazakh MFA’s statement on outcomes of Third International Meeting on Syria,” *Kazinform*, 17 March 2017 http://www.inform.kz/en/kazakh-mfa-s-statement-on-outcomes-of-third-international-meeting-on-syria_a3008747

³¹ To be precise, the areas were: Zone I (North Syria) including Idlib, North East Latakia, West Aleppo, North Hama; Zone II (Central Syria) including Rastan region in northern Homs, Zone III (South Syria) including Daraa and Quneitra and Zone IV including Eastern Ghouta. See, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html>. For further details, see the [text of memorandum on establishment of de-escalation zones, at](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Memorandum%20on%20the%20creation%20of%20de-escalation%20areas%20in%20the%20Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%20-%20%20The%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Rus.pdf) “Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic,” *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 06 May 2017, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Memorandum%20on%20the%20creation%20of%20de-escalation%20areas%20in%20the%20Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%20-%20%20The%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Rus.pdf>

and ensure the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced people. Although the talks failed to demarcate the safe zones as the opposition members withdrew from the talks owing to the bombing of rebel-held areas by the regime, the safe zones officially came into effect from midnight of May 6.³² And the signing of the memorandum by the guarantor states gave impetus to the peace process in general and the Astana talks in particular.³³

The Fifth Round

The fifth round of talks took place in July and was attended by the representatives of the guarantor states, observers including the UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura, the US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, delegates from Jordan, and representatives of the Syrian regime and nine representatives of the armed Syrian opposition including those belonging to the Northern and Southern fronts. The agenda of the talks related to de-escalation zones, activities of forces that control these zones, provisions on coordination centres and confidence building measures.³⁴ Closed-door meetings were held to discuss seven documents on de-escalation zones and a provision for a joint working group which was tasked to come up with details of a plan for de-escalation zones.

Although no document was agreed to in this round, it was decided that the Joint Working Group would meet in Iran at the beginning of August. This round of talks was significant as, for the first time, the participating delegations agreed to the presence of armed foreign monitors on the ground.³⁵ Also, for the first time, the Sunni Salafist militant group Ahrar al-Sham participated in the talks. Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, Alexey Borodavkin, stated that the Syrian opposition including the conservative Riyadh Group were no longer demanding Assad's immediate departure, which was a sign of a softening of their earlier stand.³⁶

³² "Memorandum on Syria de-escalation zones signed in Astana," *Kazinform*, 04 May 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/memorandum-on-syria-de-escalation-zones-signed-in-astana_a3023596

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ "Kazakh MFA reveals agenda of 5th round of Astana process," *Kazinform*, 29 June 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/kazakh-mfa-reveals-agenda-of-5th-round-of-astana-process_a3040781

³⁵ "Final de-escalation zones agreed on in Astana," *Al-Jazeera*, 15 September 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/final-de-escalation-zones-agreed-astana-170915102811730.html>

³⁶ The opposition accepted that mending ties with Damascus is necessary for carrying out reforms and changing the constitution, setting up new governing bodies, holding fair elections and combating terrorism. "Talks on de-escalation zones positively affect opposition's mood in Geneva — Russian envoy," *Kazinform*, 17 July

The Sixth Round

At the sixth round of talks held in mid-September, five documents related to practical issues on the ground were signed by the guarantors in the presence of regime and opposition forces. The documents dealt with regulation of de-escalation zones, humanitarian aid issues and dialogue for national re-conciliation.³⁷ Four de-escalation zones were established in Syria as per the map agreed on September 8 by the Joint Working Group in Ankara.³⁸ The Terms of Reference for deployment of de-escalation control forces was prepared by the Joint Working Group to operate in the agreed upon areas.³⁹ A Joint Coordinating Centre was established by the guarantors.⁴⁰

The guarantors confirmed their determination to continue their fight against ISIS and emphasized on the need to strengthen confidence building measures. In addition, they expressed their determination to continue implementing the provisions of the memorandum on the establishment of de-escalation zones that came into force on May 6 and reaffirmed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic along with their adherence to the provisions of UNSC resolution 2254. They also called upon observers and the international community at large to support the de-escalation process by providing assistance to the population, facilitating de-mining, undertaking efforts to preserve Syria's historical heritage, restoring life support facilities and helping to create socio-economic infrastructure. Russian Foreign

2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/talks-on-de-escalation-zones-positively-affect-opposition-s-mood-in-geneva-russian-envoy_a3046110

³⁷ "Astana-6 Talks on Syria Kick Off With Guarantor States' Working Group Meeting," *Sputnik International*, 13 September 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201709131057341934-astana-talks-guarantor-states-meetings/>

³⁸ Assel Satubaldina, "Final de-escalation zone set up in Syria," *Astana Times*, 20 September 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/AT-132d.pdf>

³⁹ "Iran, Russia, Turkey Agree on Idlib De-Escalation Zone (+Full Text)," *Tasnim News Agency*, 15 September 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/09/15/1520282/iran-russia-turkey-agree-on-idlib-de-escalation-zone-full-text>

⁴⁰ "Kazakhstan welcomes outcomes of the sixth round of the Astana Process on Syria," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Kazakhstan*, 15 September 2017, <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kazahstan-privetstvoval-rezultaty-sestogo-raunda-astaninskogo-processa-po-sirii>

Minister Sergey Lavrov mentioned after the talks that observer status shall be extended to other countries to garner additional support.⁴¹

The Seventh Round

The seventh and latest round of talks held on October 30 was attended by the representatives of the guarantor states (Russia, Turkey and Iran), representatives of observer states (USA and Jordan), and a UN official. UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura did not participate in this round of talks. This round emphasized on the need to enhance confidence building measures such as release of hostages, exchange of detainees, de-mining of territories and facilitating humanitarian aid among the parties to the conflict.⁴² It was decided that the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, which seeks to expand the range of Syrian civil society participation by engaging tribal, religious and ethnic groups including the Kurds, will be held in Sochi (originally scheduled for November 18 but ultimately held on November 22).⁴³ The Syrian government participated in the Congress in Sochi. But perceiving the extension of invitations to various groups as contributing to disunity and fragmentation⁴⁴ and as an attempt to brush aside the issue of political transition without Assad, the opposition chose to participate in a meeting of opposition groups held in Riyadh. Mohammad Alloush, a member of the Syrian opposition's high

⁴¹ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Surinamese Foreign Minister Yldiz Pollack-Beighle," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 31 October 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2927121; "Russian top diplomat comments on Astana process results," *Kazinform*, 06 October 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/russian-top-diplomat-comments-on-astana-process-results_a3072438

⁴² "Astana process: Russia, Iran, Turkey issue joint statement," *Kazinform*, 31 October 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/astana-process-russia-iran-turkey-issue-joint-statement_a3080735

⁴³ "Astana process parties to hold Syrian national congress in Sochi," *Kazinform*, 01 November 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/astana-process-parties-to-hold-syrian-national-congress-in-sochi_a3080807

⁴⁴ "Syrian Opposition Won't Participate In Russian-Sponsored Congress," *Radio Free Europe*, 01 November 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-turkey-endorse-russian-plan-host-syrian-peace-talks-without-west/28827630.html>; "Syrian opposition rejects Russia-sponsored peace initiative," *Reuters*, 01 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-oppositio/syrian-opposition-rejects-russia-sponsored-peace-initiative-idUSKBN1D13UU?ref=hpver.com>; Sami Moubayed, "Sochi talks already a non-starter," *The Arab Weekly*, 12 November 2017, <http://www.thearabweekly.com/pdf/2017/11/12-11/p05.pdf>

negotiations committee (HNC), dismissed the Sochi conference as a “meeting between the regime and the regime.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

The Astana talks have helped revive the Geneva process which had remained stalled for more than a year. The Russia-led Astana talks have gained US support⁴⁶ and it is expected that the Sochi dialogue will bring elements of Syrian civil society on board, thus enabling the quick attainment of a ceasefire. The tangible results of the Astana process lie in the reduction in violence and functioning of de-escalation zones. The fact that the six-month ceasefire⁴⁷ brokered by Russia and US with the help of Jordan in southwest Syria in July has survived till now and will most likely be renewed in the next round of talks provides hope for peace in Syria.⁴⁸ By focusing on the cessation of violence and humanitarian issues, the Astana talks would hopefully serve as a prelude to peace in Syria.

⁴⁵ Patrick Wintour, “Syrian opposition rejects Russia talks as west frets over influence,” *The Guardian*, 01 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/01/syrian-opposition-refuses-to-attend-russian-peace-talks>

⁴⁶ The US sent Assistant secretary of State Stuart Jones to the fourth round instead of US Ambassador to Kazakhstan George Krol who had attended the previous rounds as observer. The decision to send Jones was announced after President Donald Trump held a phone call with President Vladimir Putin on May 2, which focused largely on Syria and a Russian proposal for “zones of de-escalation” in Syria. For the seventh round, the US sent Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Satterfield who appreciated the role of the Astana talks in the de-escalation process. See, Laura Rozen, “US to send senior envoy to Syria talks after Trump-Putin call,” *Al Monitor*, 02 May 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/05/trump-putin-call-envoy-astana-syria-talks.html>

⁴⁷ “US-Russia ceasefire holding in southwest Syria, say rebel sources,” *The Guardian*, 09 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/09/us-russian-ceasefire-holding-in-southwest-syria-say-rebel-sources>

⁴⁸ None of the ceasefires established before this had been successful and this is for the first time that the US and Russia came together on the same plane. The truce was not a part of the Astana talks but signified serious involvement of the two powers. It came on the side-lines of the G20 summit where the US committed to defeating ISIS. See, Fiona Keating, “Ceasefire brokered by US and Russia begins in Syria,” *Independent*, 09 July 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/syria-latest-ceasefire-latest-us-russia-donald-trump-vladimir-putin-a7831656.html>

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