



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Levant & Eastern Med February 2017

Pax Russica?

A second round of talks between Russia, Turkey and Iran, begun in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, on February 16th, with the main players focusing on a way to implement a delicate ceasefire. The meeting was aimed at paving the way towards United Nations-led political negotiations in Geneva on February 23rd. The Geneva negotiations are expected to be wider-ranging, focussing on the key issues that divide the government and rebel sides, including the fate of President Bashar al-Assad. Organised by Russia, patron of the Assad regime, and embraced by Turkey as the representative of the opposition forces, the talks were attended by regime officials and armed opposition representatives.

However the dialogue between the two parties and also within the opposition camp was scarce. Opposition spokesman Yahya al-Aridi had earlier played down expectations that the rebels would sign a potential collective statement at the end of the talks, saying that several obstacles still needed to be overcome. He cited a number of rebel demands, including the lifting of sieges, the release of prisoners and the delivery of aid to besieged areas. He also added that the rebels are expecting "goodwill gestures" on part of the regime, including the release of political detainees and aid deliveries. Bashar al-Jaafari, head of the Syrian government delegation, referred to the rebel delegation as "terrorists" and slashed their positions as provocations.

The hope of an agreement relies heavily on a dialogue between regional powers backing the warring parties, primarily Turkey and Russia. This dialogue is however marred with complications. A year ago, their feud reached a climax as Turkey shot down a Russian bomber on its border with Syria. The relations turned on the verge of confrontation with President Putin calling it "a stab in the back by an accomplice of terror", accusing President Erdogan's family to benefit from oil smuggling by so-called Islamic State.

The row was ended symbolically, by a letter of apologies wrote by President Erdogan to his Russian counterpart and, substantially, by the inescapable necessity to cooperate over the geopolitical disaster in Syria. Russia needed to snatch the "useful Syria" back under regime control and securing Assad along with its own powerful role.

Turkey needs to secure its borders, and indeed already said it will not hand over the northern town of al-Bab to Syria's government after militants from the Islamic State are driven out. But the danger for Mr Erdogan is that some Turks have not followed his warming to Moscow, shown by the assassination of the Russian ambassador. Turkey was engaged for years in high-pitched rhetoric that made many here acutely aware of the tragedy of Syria. As Turkey plays Realpolitik, many won't be able to accept it.

Erdogan's solution would be apparently, to re-direct hostility towards the other backer of the Assad regime, Iran. Strongly encouraged in this endeavor by his steel allies in the Arab Gulf and by the new

administration's anti-Iranian perspective, himself and other Turkish officials have been accusing Tehran of pursuing a Persian imperialist and a sectarian agenda thorough the region at the highest levels, including the Munich Security Conference. Tehran responded with equally harsh remarks citing Turkey's negative role in the region.

All in all it seems clear that even these rounds of negotiations will not be able to accomplish meaningful progress.

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