

Russia, Turkey and Iran Brokering Syrian Peace, US Excluded

ALTHOUGH THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION scandal allegedly involving Russian hacking has resulted in the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats and the closure of two Russian diplomatic compounds in New York and Maryland, the bigger news story is the Middle East peace process being conducted by Russia, Turkey, and Iran without US involvement.

Just before the Christmas break, on **December 20**, the **Russian, Turkish, and Iranian foreign ministers gathered in Moscow to discuss the situation in Syria**. As a result of the meeting, the three announced their willingness to facilitate **future negotiations** between Damascus and Syrian opposition groups.

According to the New York Times

"[Russia](#), [Iran](#) and [Turkey](#) met in Moscow on Tuesday to work toward a political accord to end [Syria's](#) nearly six-year war, leaving the United States on the sidelines.."

"Secretary of State John Kerry was not invited. Nor was the United Nations consulted."

"With pro-government forces having made critical gains on the ground, the new alignment and the absence of any Western powers at the table all but guarantee that President [Bashar al-Assad](#) will continue to rule Syria under any resulting agreement, despite President Obama's declaration more than five years ago that Mr. Assad had lost legitimacy and had to

be removed.”

“Andrew J. Tabler, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who studies Syria stated, “When the Turks, the Iranians and the Russians all agree on a process without the U.S. being in the room, you realize there is a problem for us.”

As a result of the meeting, the three nations issued a document referred to by the New York Times as [“The Moscow Declaration”](#). Among its eight articles, the “Declaration” adumbrates:

1. Iran, Russia and Turkey respect the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as multi-ethnic, multi-religious, non-sectarian, democratic and secular state.

2. **There is no military solution to the Syrian conflict.** The United Nations is essential in the efforts to resolve this crisis in accordance with UNSC resolution 2254.

3. The importance of expanding ceasefire, unhindered humanitarian assistance and free movement of civilians throughout the country.

5. **Iran, Russia and Turkey express their readiness to facilitate and become the guarantors of the prospective agreement, being negotiated, between the Syrian Government and the opposition.** They invited all other countries with the influence on the situation on the ground to do the same.

7. The Ministers take note of the kind offer of the President of Kazakhstan to host relevant meetings in Astana.

RESULTS OF THE MOSCOW DECLARATION

The Moscow Declaration was promulgated on December 20; last night at midnight (December 29-30) the Assad government and the main Syrian opposition groups agreed to a nationwide cease-fire. [Turkey's Anadolu News Agency](#), reports that Russia and Turkey will jointly guarantee implementation of the ceasefire agreement.

Although other cease fire agreements brokered by the UN have been unsuccessful, Turkey and Russia previously negotiated a cease fire, in the first half of December 2016, that led to the successful evacuation of civilians and rebel fighters from the city of Aleppo. One rebel commander told Reuters: "This time I have confidence in its seriousness. There is new international input" (Turkey and Iran working with Russia)

Thus, this morning, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told the press:

*"I hope this cease-fire will turn into a **sustainable peace** that would prevent further bloodshed and the killing of civilians, innocents and children."*

The deal involves on one side the Syrian government armed forces, their allies and the Russian Federation. The other side includes rebel factions operating under the umbrella of the **The High Negotiations Committee (HNC)**, which represents Syria's opposition groups and the so-called Free Syrian Army terrorists backed by the United States intended to topple the Assad regime; they are now committed to pursuing negotiations in Astana. According to "[World Affairs Journal](#)"

"The High Negotiations Committee (HNC), regarded by the UN as Syria's main opposition body, confirmed the deal, which excludes jihadist groups. If the truce holds, peace talks will be held in Kazakhstan within a month."

President Putin made it known that the agreement revolves around three major principles:

1. Ceasefire among all parties involved in the conflict
2. Measures to oversee the truce
3. An agreement to initiate peace talks

Although of major importance, Putin referred to the deal as “fragile”. [According to the BBC](#), he also indicated that Russia would reduce its military presence in Syria, but would “continue fighting international terrorism and supporting the Syrian government”.

Negotiations are expected to begin in January at Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

The Cease-Fire Includes Comprehensive Peace Talks in Kazakhstan's Capital Astana

Russia, Iran and Turkey were instrumental in freeing Aleppo and are now poised to take the next step. During the Moscow meeting, December 19, 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the President of Turkey, agreed to call the major parties involved in Syrian combat to meet in Astana, Kazakhstan to begin a peace initiative. Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, supports the process and the opportunity to host the participants. Interestingly, the UN has announced that it too will conduct negotiations involving the Syrian government and opposition groups scheduled for February 8 in Geneva, Switzerland.

[Reuters](#) notes that, at the Astana meeting,

“The Syrian government will be negotiating from a strong position after its army and their allies, including Shi’ite militias supported by Iran, along with Russian air power, routed rebels in their last major urban stronghold of Aleppo

this month.”

“Moscow’s air campaign since September last year has turned the civil war in Assad’s favour, and the last rebels left Aleppo for areas that are still under rebel control to the west of the city, including the province of Idlib.”

All sides are agreed that the terrorist groups such as ISIL/ISIS, Al Nusra and Daesh must be defeated. The defeat of the terrorists has taken primary position. Even **the Turks who had previously insisted that Assad must be removed have now shifted their emphasis to the Syrian Kurds living on the Syrian-Turkish border** whom they consider to be a threat to the stability of Turkey. With every day that passes, it seems more certain that Assad will remain in power to be removed only by a free democratic election that represents the will of the Syrian people, something the United States as opposed but that Russia has insisted upon all along – the United States wants Assad gone. The last time such an election was held in 2014, Assad won 88.7% of the vote.

Since that time, and the fall of Aleppo, things have changed considerably. Turkey watching Russia’s success and angered by the United States backing of the Kurds, which Ankara views as an existential threat, has continually distanced itself from NATO and the US; Turkey is now showing sure signs of a shift toward the Russian-Iranian-Syrian-Iraqi camp.

At the meeting in which Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to “the Moscow Declaration,” the United States was not consulted, nor was the UN envoy to Syria invited.

The United States is suffering an embarrassment and must save face *vis a vis* the Russians somehow. The fact is, the US is playing its foreign policy cards all wrong. As the [*Russian*](#)

[Insider](#) reports. "So much so that Assad whom the empire had marked for the trash bin in 2011 now looks certain to survive and defeat the jihad against the Syrian Baath government....Ankara has gone from working with the US and Saudia Arabia and Qatar to topple the Syrian government to talking with Iran and Russia how to find a political solution that ends the conflict."

Turkey is quite simply refusing to serve as a US-UN puppet any longer. Ankara views the fight against Kurdish militants as a more important objective than the UN-US objective aimed at the removal of Assad. Thus, according to [Aaron Stein](#) of the Atlantic Council:

"This is Turkey bending to Russia...This is putting a fine point on Turkey's policy of 'Assad must go' no longer being the policy."

Consequently, the clear forecast includes the centrality of the Kurds and Kurdistan in the peace talks. Alluding to the Kurds (but also including ISIS/ISIL-Daesh), [Turkey's Prime Minister stated](#):

"We will hunt them everywhere. We will follow them wherever they flee. This is no joke. We will continue our work for the peace and safety of our nation."

Participation of Kurds in Astana Process

The Kurdish problem cannot be comprehended unless it is realized that the Kurds are represented by several political-military groups. Kurds living in Turkey comprise roughly 22% of the Turkish population. They are represented by the **Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)**, a party that Turkey considers a terrorist organization, as does NATO, the EU and the United States. The PKK, although existing in Turkey, hopes to

establish an independent state known as Kurdistan.

There are other Kurds living in Iraq and Syria. Syrian Kurds are represented by the “**Democratic Union Party**” (PYD). The PYD was established in 2003 as a major opposition party to the Syrian government located in Northern Syria in an area contiguous with Turkey, thus an additional potential challenge for Turkey as well. In 2012 the PYD (in Syria) formed local militias or **People’s Protection Units (YPG)** to help Kurds cooperate for their own security and to assist the United States in its fight against ISIS. The US armed the YPG through a broader group known as the **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**. The SDF includes Kurdish militia in Northern Syria – Syrian Kurdish militia (YPG) are being armed with American weapons. When the SDF was founded in 2015, [The Economist](#) described it as “essentially a subsidiary of the Kurdish YPG. Likewise [CNN reports](#) that

“The United States has denied supplying the YPG with weapons but says it provides tactical support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, the umbrella group in which the YPG is the main component.”

Thus, Turkey is weary about any affiliations between the PKK (in Turkey) and the PYD (in Syria), especially since the PYD has established armed security units (YPG) that Ankara believes are armed, dangerous, and affiliated with the PKK in Turkey.

Not only are foreign relations with Turkey involving Kurds on the Turkish border a problem for the future, the future Syrian government will have to be extra creative when handling the indigenous Kurds who have exercised a degree of autonomy during the Syrian conflict unknown previously. In 2012 Assad essentially relinquished control of Northeast Syria to the Kurds. This area is home to the bulk of the country’s oil reserves (also across the border of Iraq’s oil reserves) and

some of its prime agricultural lands. As much as Syria, Iraq and Turkey might want to see them go away, the Kurds are certainly a player in Syria's future as well as the futures of Iraq and Turkey.

To complicate the situation, another group of Kurdish militants known as the Peshmerga exist in Northern, Iraq also close to Turkey and Syria. Since the Peshmerga aided the US in its war with Iraq, they have long been considered a US ally.

Thus, [Bilal Wahab Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute](#) notes the strong ties between the US and Iraqi Kurds:

"As reliable on-the-ground partners to the United States, the Kurdish forces in Syria, like their brethren in Iraq, have gained a reputation as fierce fighters and a bulwark against the Islamic State (also called ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh). Indeed, the Kurdish fighters have often been portrayed as foot soldiers for the United States in Syria. In that regard, not only did the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Peshmerga defend the Kurdish population, they are also slated to be instrumental in the U.S. led coalition efforts."

Clearly, the participation of Syrian Kurds (who have not yet been invited to participate in the Geneva negotiations) in the Astana Process is a crucial issue. Turkey remains adamantly opposed to Kurdish participation, while Russia continues to insist that the Kurds be included. Since the date of the meeting and list of participants has not yet been concluded, there is still time to include the Kurds. It is hard to imagine a peace process in which a major party to the conflict such as the Kurds (a party with a long standing cultural tradition and historical roots in Northern Syria, Iraq, and Southern Turkey) is excluded.

Nonetheless, [Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced today](#) that:

"The Syria's Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) will not take part in the talks on Syrian settlement in Astana. As for its armed wing, the YPG, if they lay down arms and support the territorial integrity of Syria instead of forming a terrorist canton, they will be included in the country's government. If they do not refuse terrorism... we will continue our struggle against them."

Ankara simply desires a Turkey friendly region in Northern Syria. If Kurdish militants lay down their arms, as far as Turkey is concerned, they will be admitted to the negotiation table in Astana.

The other party whose presence at Astana is as yet undecided is the previously mentioned **Syrian High Negotiation Committee (HNC)** the umbrella group for Syrian opposition groups. What the *World Journal* failed to mention above is that **HNC is a Saudi-backed and formulated umbrella organization.**

The HNC has *not* been invited and it is highly unlikely, in spite of their self-proclaimed importance, that they will be invited. The HNC was formed late in 2015; it has its headquarters in Riyadh home of Sunni radicalism, of Shariah Law and Wahhabi and Salafist ultra-extremism. The Saud monarchs rule their country with a tight fist. For centuries they have been locked in deadly combat with Shiite Iran and have been the prime supporters of jihad and terrorism in Syria. It is hard to imagine a group supported by the Sauds involved in a peace process that will strengthen the hands of its enemies viz., Iran, Russia and Turkey. Moreover, the HNC plan for transition, drafted in 2016 and welcomed by the government of Great Britain, **insist that President Assad must be removed from office within six months of any transition.** This is contrary to the Syrian initiated democratic process envisioned by the Russians and the Syrian people themselves who voted overwhelmingly in Assad's favor in 2014.

Moreover, according to [Aljazeera News](#)

*“Chief opposition negotiator Riyadh Hijab... said **the HNC would reject any agreement struck by Russia and the US if it largely differed from the HNC’s terms.**”*

It is highly unlikely that a newly formed coalition of rebels headquartered in an enemy state will dictate terms to Russia, Iran and Turkey, esp. since their combined forces have been victorious thus far deep into the war.

The British, moreover, are working with leaders of the HNC to promote a *liberal democracy* (a type of democracy that is withering around the globe – **not democracy *per-se*, but “liberal democracy”**) in Syria to end what they call the “tyranny of the Assad regime.” [According to the UK Government](#):

“The UK has and remains at the forefront of international efforts to address the Syria crisis. The UK’s membership of the UN Security Council and International Syria Support Group is used to call for adherence to the cessation of hostilities and full humanitarian access.”

[The UK wants to help build a democracy in Syria](#), but Syrians do not want the UK; they would rather decide the future for themselves.

What makes the participation of HNC even more remote is the involvement of Turkey whom the Saudis have historically depended upon to balance power *vis a vis* Iran. That scenario is now in jeopardy – a peace process brokered by Iran united to Russia and Turkey is anathema to the Saudis. Thus, it is extremely unlikely that either the HNC or the Saudis will participate or be offered a voice and certainly not a vote (if there is any vote) in Astana.

It appears that the Turks have already compromised with Russia

and Syria on Assad. Consequently, they have some wiggle room to resist Russia on the Kurdish question (see note 2 below). Turkey also faces an imbroglio with Iran. Ankara continues to insist that Hezbollah (an Iranian backed Lebanese shia militia that has supported Assad) vacate Syria. Turkey will probably get its way on this issue as well, as long as all three agree that Assad remains in power. Of the four issues: Assad, Hezbollah, HNC, and the Kurds, the latter seems the most difficult to resolve.

Nonetheless, the issue will be resolved by the Russians, Iranians and Turks. **Under President Obama, the United States neocons are suffering a humiliating defeat, an international debacle far from their vision for a New American Century – The US is being taken out of the game and being placed on the bench by the Russians.** Putin is now calling the shots (see note 1 below).

“Russia has said the United States could join a fresh peace process once President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Jan. 20. It also wants Egypt to join, together with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan and the United Nations” ([Reuters, Dec 30, 2016](#)).

Russian Secretary of State Sergey Lavrov stressed these sentiments in a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin:

“I would like to express the hope that as soon as the administration of Donald Trump takes office, they will also be able to join these efforts [to settle the Syrian crisis] so that we could jointly work in this direction” ([CNN News](#)).

President-Elect Trump has indicated his willingness to cooperate more closely with Russia. He will face opposition from neo-conservative and neo-liberal statesmen and from ranking officials in the Pentagon and intelligence community. Nonetheless, he has an opportunity to work with Russia and

the global community toward world peace. But to be successful he must resign himself to the reality that the vision for a liberal new American Century must be modified. The age of liberal global hegemony is coming to an end. Increasingly, the nations of the world are opting for national sovereignty and a restoration of traditional family values as the *Era of Peace* promised at Fatima continues to dawn upon the nations.

The United States can either adjust and cooperate or continue suffering one foreign policy embarrassment after another.

NOTE

1. New Era does not foresee Russia remaining in this position, but for the moment it is increasing its global prestige until complimented and surpassed by a resurgent Europe.
2. [The YPG, and its political counterpart, the Democratic Union Party \(PYD\), have also forged increasingly close relations with Russia](#), recently symbolised by the formal opening of a PYD representative office in Moscow