The Astana platform for Syria: The limits of a conflict management mediation process

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THE ASTANA PLATFORM FOR SYRIA: THE LIMITS OF A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MEDIATION PROCESS

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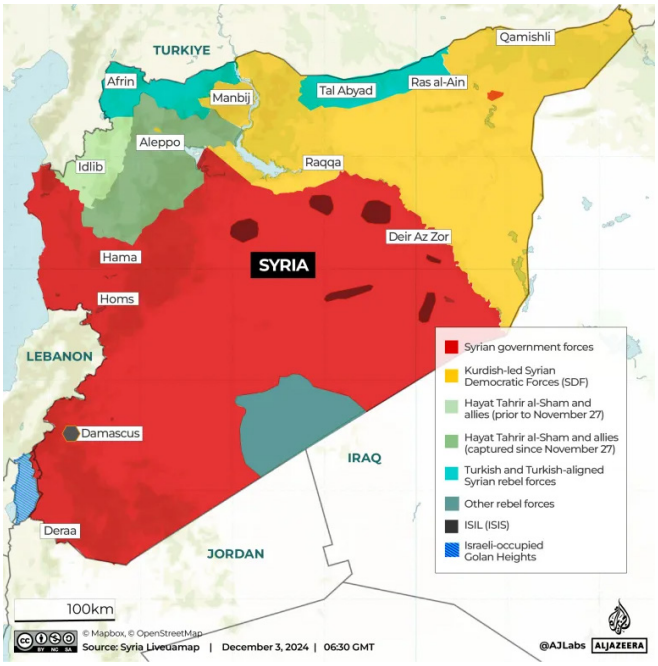
Introduction

The unexpected ousting of the Assad regime in December 2024 by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition groups terminated the volatile status quo in place in Syria since 2020. Syria's sudden implosion illustrated the failure of international mediation efforts to end Syria's 13-year civil war. Since the onset of the war, there has been a multitude of mediation initiatives, the two most significant being the process led by the United Nations (UN) in Geneva and the Astana mediation platform convened by Russia, Iran and Turkey. This paper focuses on the Astana process and compares it to the UN's Geneva process. The paper reviews how the regionalized nature of the Syrian conflict and the engagement of external actors with distinct interests in the Astana process have impacted mediation efforts between 2012 and 2024.



One of the questions underlying the discussion is whether the goal of the Astana platform has been to support a "Syrian-led political process" and establish "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance," as stated in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.[1] The paper begins with a discussion of the conflict dynamics and then examines the Astana process. It argues that external actor engagement and the exclusion of civil society from the Astana process made it difficult to arrive at a political resolution of the conflict and concludes that conflict management is inherently unstable because it does not resolve the core issues driving the conflict.

Conflict dynamics and external actor interests

The Syrian war began as an uprising against the dictatorial regime of President Assad, inspired by the popular uprisings sweeping the Arab world.[2] The pro-democracy demonstrations later metamorphosed into a civil war and a proxy conflict through which external powers sought influence by supporting state and non-state armed actors. This support included military aid and training, economic assistance, joint military operations with local forces, and political backing. The war has resulted in the death of half a million Syrians and displacement of another 14 million.[3] The devastation of cities and infrastructure has left 70% of the population in need of humanitarian assistance and 90% living below the poverty line.[4]

Russia entered the war in 2015, seizing the opportunity presented by the 'light footprint' Middle East strategy adopted by the Obama administration after 2009. Russia's objective was to keep the Assad regime in power, a position that had historical roots from the Cold War when Syria was an ally of the Soviet Union. Russia's naval base in Tartus, the only remaining one outside its borders since

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Portraits of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad (R) and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stand at the entrance of the Yarmuk camp for Palestinian refugees, south of Damascus, on 26 March 2024. ***Photo****: Louai Beshara/AFP via Getty Images*

the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its air base in Hmeimim, are key strategic assets. Syria has also been an important market for Russian arms sales since the 1960s and provided a market for Russian energy and infrastructure companies.[5]

The Islamic State's (IS) operational presence in Syria drew the United States (US) officially into the war, partnering with a coalition of allies. The US took the lead against IS and the al-Nusra front inside Syria (US Department of Defense online). The campaign was waged by local allies on the ground, primarily the Iraqi security forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). US support for the SDF enabled the Kurdish movement to govern the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Turkey has been involved militarily in the war because it considers the territorial integrity of the Syrian state to be an existential imperative, rejecting any form of Kurdish autonomy on its border. While Turkey and Russia have had a confrontational, transactional relationship, Iran's interests have aligned with Russia in seeking to maintain Assad in power. Iran's Quds force was critical in waging the brutal war on the ground. Iran's interest in Syria was part of a larger geopolitical aim to secure its sphere of interest and counter Saudi Arabia, its regional rival, and the influence of other Arab countries involved in Syria. Syria is part of Iran's 'forward defense' strategy intended to counter potential threats before they reach Iranian borders.[6] As such, Syria was also important in maintaining territorial access to Lebanon and Iran's proxy, Hezbollah.

Prior to the fall of Assad in 2024, the war divided Syria into three main zones of control. Most of the country - including the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and nearly all the governorates' capitals - were controlled by the Government of Syria (GoS); the north-east was under the control of the Kurdish-led SDF; and the north-west was controlled mainly by anti-GoS militias, notably HTS, which emerged from an amalgamation of several Salafist Islamist forces. There were also smaller patches of territory in the north, bordering Turkey, under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which comprised more than 40 non-state actors supported by Turkey.

The demarcation lines of these zones of control had largely been stable since March 2020 when President Putin of Russia and President Erdoğan of Turkey agreed on a ceasefire, the Moscow Agreement, in north-west Syria. Prior to this, skirmishes between the two powers had threatened to escalate into direct hostilities.[7]

Mediation dynamics

Efforts to end the war began with an Arab League initiative in late 2011 - a peace plan that included the holding of multi-candidate presidential elections in 2014. However, the Arab League's inability to stop the bloodshed and ultimately agree on a common position on Assad's rule resulted in the failure of this initiative. In January 2012 Russia proposed 'informal' talks between

the Syrian government and opposition, but the Syrian National Council refused any dialogue with the Assad regime. As a response to consistent Russian and Chinese vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a political transition to end the violence, in 2012 France established the Friends of Syria Group (later referred to as the 'Small Group'), which worked towards strengthening and
unifying the opposition.[8] The Small Group remained an informal group throughout these years and gained traction through its opposition to the Astana platform.

Photo: *STANISLAV FILIPPOV / AFP*

Following a Friends of Syria conference in 2012, the Arab League asked the UN to take over the mediation process.[9] Kofi Annan was appointed as the Joint Special Envoy for the UN and the Arab League to negotiate with the Syrian regime.[10] He presented a six-point plan, supported by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, that was formally accepted by the Syrian regime.[11] The agreement called for a ceasefire to prepare the road towards a political solution. However, the agreement failed, with the GoS ignoring Annan's calls for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from urban areas.[12] In June 2012 Annan made another attempt through the Geneva I Conference on Syria, which issued the Geneva Communiqué stating the need for a transitional government that could include members of the Syrian government and the opposition, with the future of Assad remaining up for negotiation. Consistent violations of the ceasefire and disagreement over a political transition resulted in the failure of Geneva I. Likewise, the Geneva II conference in 2014 was unable to reach an agreement.[13]

In 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2254 followed the Geneva Communiqué in calling for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on inclusive, non-sectarian governance, codified in a new constitution and established through free and fair elections.[14] It also emphasized the need for an immediate nation-wide ceasefire. However, it retained the ambiguity over Assad's future and his role in any political transition, instead agreeing to a compromise formula - a Transitional Governing Body – that did not pre-determine a governance outcome. Subsequent rounds of UN peace talks on Syria, held in Geneva (eight by 2023), failed to make notable progress due to the core unresolved issue of Assad's future.

In light of the deadlock in the UN process, in 2017 Russia organized a tripartite mediation platform that included Iran and Turkey. The three countries were to serve as guarantors of the Astana process and issued a joint declaration, stating that they "Reaffirm their commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, non-sectarian and democratic State" and adding "their conviction that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict."[15] They further pledged "to minimizing violations, reducing violence, building confidence, ensuring unhindered humanitarian access swiftly and smoothly in line with the UN Security Council resolution 2165 (2014)."[16]

The Astana process included regional actors, namely Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq. Officially, it was intended to complement and not compete with the UN-led mediation process. Avoiding confrontations between the two processes was important, so UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura diplomatically declared that the Astana process would "jumpstart the convening of the formal political negotiating process."[17]

At the Astana talks, the Syrian conflict parties were represented by the Assad regime's ambassador to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, while the opposition consisted of the largest armed rebel coalition, Jaysh al-Islam, under the leadership of Mohammed Alloush.[18] Whereas the Geneva talks had included civil society organizations, the Astana talks were confined to armed opposition groups and the GoS.[19] The Kurdish Democratic party (PYD), governing the Northeast region, was blacklisted by Turkey, and extremist jihadi groups, including HTS and IS, were not invited.[20]

The UN-led mediation had established a set of four baskets for the intra-Syrian talks. These included a legitimate non-sectarian transitional government; a future constitution; parliamentary elections within 18 months; and a united war against terrorism within Syria, as well as confidence-building measures between Syrian opposition groups.[21] Once the Astana process began, Russia was able to transfer files concerning military issues and the cessation of hostilities from the Geneva process to the Astana platform. These were later the basis for establishing de-escalation zones at the Astana talks in 2017. Such zones were locally negotiated

agreements that isolated opposition enclaves from one another, with the stated purpose of 'reconciliation.' In reality, this implied pressuring opposition-controlled areas to agree to political settlements acceptable to the Assad regime.[22] Four escalation zones were negotiated, with ceasefires established in each zone,[23] namely in Eastern Ghouta, Homs, Daraa and Idlib.

The de-escalation zones succeeded in containing the violence but also allowed the Syrian regime, aided by Russia and Iran, to reclaim control of three of the zones and parts of the fourth in 2018-2019. This forced the armed opposition and 4.5 million Syrians, many of them internally displaced people, into Idlib, which became a refuge for remaining fighters and civilians fleeing or transferred from other de-escalation zones.[24] Turkey, for its part, launched 'Operation Peace Spring' in 2019, aimed at preventing the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish presence at its border. Successive military offensives by the Syrian regime and its allies, and the ensuing ceasefires negotiated with Ankara, enabled the GoS to redraw the demarcation lines. In short, although the de-escalation zones reduced conflict, they served primarily to impose the will of the guarantor powers on the agreed upon areas. Major weaknesses were that there were no mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement of violations and that armed actors such as HTS, IS and the Kurdish PYD did not accept the de-escalation zone agreement.[25]

Fighters from the Democratic Forces of Syria inspect weapons and ammunition in Hasaka province, Syria, February 26, 2016. ***Photo:*** *Rodi Said/Reuters*

By the summer of 2023 there had been 20 rounds of Astana talks, whose greatest achievements lay in establishing control over opposition territories, preventing the flow of refugees (particularly following the bilateral Turkey-Russia agreement), and mitigating interstate conflict. With no prospects for resolving the issue of political transition, a regional 'normalization' process with the Syrian regime began in 2018, and in 2023 the Assad regime was re-admitted into the Arab League.[26]

Effects of regional dynamics on mediation

Until December 2024, Syria was an unresolved conflict that relied on the demarcation lines negotiated by external powers to stabilize the situation on the ground. However, this was not a viable long-term solution, as illustrated by the rapid take-over of the country by HTS with popular support.

It has been a challenge for the mediation process that external states and their proxies were embedded in both the conflict and the mediation. The dependency of the Assad regime on Russia and Iran for its survival created a dynamic through which it calibrated its position according to the needs of its sponsors. The conflict and mediation landscape was thus complicated greatly by the external states' interests at the local level (protecting national interests and proxy groups), the regional level (competing with other states for regional leadership) and the global level. These considerations were compounded by the international context of wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, in which mediating actors' agendas impacted the conflict on the ground in Syria. Furthermore, the weakening of Iran following Israel's attacks on Hezbollah and Hamas in 2023-4, and Russia's military challenges in Ukraine, created a vacuum that Turkey was able to fill. It did this through its support for non-state actors on the ground, thereby securing its dominant position in Syria.

The following section discusses the deleterious effects that external actors' interests have had on the mediation process.

Multiple mediation tracks

The existence of two mediation tracks, one led by the UN and the other by Russia, afforded the Syrian regime room for maneuver. In particular, the differences between the UN and Astana positions regarding a political solution prolonged Assad's hold on power. Moreover, it gave rise to different approaches on critical issues. For example, while de-escalation was also a part of the Geneva process, the transfer of the ceasefire file from Geneva to Astana prevented consideration of de-escalation as a contribution to the

political process.[27] The outcome of the de-escalation zones also impacted the Geneva process; this issue was ultimately seen as a Russian tactical invention and was therefore not considered in political discussions at the UN mediation.[28]

In addition, the two tracks complicated the formation of a Constitutional Committee as mandated by Security Council Resolution 2254. At the Sochi conference, Russia was keen to establish this committee and determine its composition, which the UN opposed. After negotiations between the UN and Russia, an agreement was reached whereby the Constitutional Committee was formed in Geneva, but its composition was heavily influenced by Russia and Turkey. Despite the UN's announcement on the formation of the committee in 2019, however, there was little progress.

Biased mediation

The Astana process prioritized external actors' interests, which contributed to transforming an internal conflict into an international one. This raises the stakes in any mediation process, making it more difficult to resolve. The complexity of the Syrian process was compounded by two of the Astana hosts being engaged in larger conflicts that impacted on their role as mediators: Russia's war against Ukraine, as mentioned above, drew its focus away from Syria; the war in Gaza and the conflict in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah sporadically played out in Syria, risking stability on the ground; and these dynamics weakened Iran's position on the ground.

Cohesion of the mediating actors

The fluctuating and transactional relationships among the three organizers of the Astana process added an element of unpredictability and undermined the cohesion of the process. This was reinforced by the unequal political leverage that the mediators had towards the conflicting parties and their respective powerful proxies on the ground. Furthermore, the nature of the external powers' relationships to one another is such that there is a lack of trust, not only from the conflicting parties towards the mediating actors but also among the mediating actors themselves.

Representation and ownership

Another aspect of the Astana mediation that prevented a lasting political solution was the lack of civil society representation and ownership of the process due to the priority given to the armed non-state groups. The Astana talks included a wide spectrum of non-state military actors, including several rebel groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al Islam, the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Al-Sham Army, and the Central Division.[29] These groups, some of which (such as Jaysh al-Islam) were considered terrorist groups by Russia and Syria, were included at the insistence of Saudi Arabia.

The lack of inclusion of groups such as women, youth and other components of civil society weakened the ownership, inclusivity and legitimacy of the process. The participation of certain actors but not others reflected negotiation among the external actors rather than the needs of the domestic population. The Russian preference for only including opposition groups tolerated by the Assad regime in negotiations for a political solution further weakened the legitimacy of the process.[30]

Syrians who were evacuated from the last rebel-held pockets of the northern city of Aleppo, arrive in the opposition-controlled Khan al-Assal ***Photo****: Getty Images*

Proliferation, fragmentation and competition among non-state military actors

The engagement of external states led to a proliferation of military actors and security challenges on the ground as different groups competed for dominance. An example is the rise of HTS in Syria's northwest. Although HTS emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq, the forebearer of ISIS, the organization broke with both ISIS and al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise Hurras al-Deen in order to gain a dominant foothold in Idlib. In the process, it created further fragmentation within its own ranks.[31] Between 2013 and 2016 Turkey, along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, provided direct and indirect financial support to armed Islamist

opposition groups.[32] Turkey's support for the SNA (described above) further fragmented the security landscape.

De-escalation as a tactic of war

In many conflicts, ceasefires are key to stopping violence, allowing humanitarian access and preparing the ground for productive negotiations and a lasting peace agreement. In Syria, however, the ceasefires brokered through the Astana process became a war tactic. De-escalation zones were used to keep opposition military activity at a low level, allowing the Assad regime to attack these areas with support from Russia. Furthermore, by stabilizing the demarcation lines between conflict actors on the ground and their external state sponsors, the militias in enclaves under occupation engaged in local governance, impacting citizenship and property rights, humanitarian access and the development of local economies.[33]

Strategies to address regional dynamics

The mediation undertaken by states directly involved in the conflict diminished the possibility of achieving an outcome aligned with the UN mandate of "a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition" and prevented a credible, cohesive and effective process that could deliver a political solution. Key aims of both Astana and Geneva were guided by UN documents (the Geneva Communiqué and the UNSC Resolution 2254), with the stated aim of establishing a ceasefire and a political solution. Where the two processes differed was the focus on military issues in the Astana process, whereas the Geneva process sought a political solution with Assad's future to be determined through addressing governance issues.

There have been few tools to address the regional conflict dynamics effectively due to the internationalization of the conflict, the complexity of local actors' engagement and the unwillingness of the Astana hosts to consider any political transition that would weaken their own positions. As a result, the regional conflict dynamics were addressed through a process of conflict management rather than conflict resolution. The Astana hosts sought primarily to protect their own interests and prevent the escalation of violence rather than find a permanent political solution through inclusive negotiations and compromise.

Conclusion

External military intervention in a civil war can serve distinct geostrategic objectives that are "additional to the goals of the domestic combatants."[34] One could argue that the Syrian case shows that mediation has served the geostrategic objectives of the Astana hosts to the exclusion of the Syrian political opposition. Inclusivity in the Astana process meant including armed non-state actors to stabilize internal security in the escalation zones and serve the interests of external powers, crowding out civil society. The Astana process succeeded in achieving a reduction of hostilities but did not come close to resolving the conflict. For its part, the UN increasingly became irrelevant, primarily because of the dominance of military actors in the Astana process. However, as the upheaval of December 2024 indicates, maintaining a status quo through conflict management without conflict resolution is unsustainable.

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