

# **Astana Agreement and the Battle for Eastern Syria**

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## **Introduction**

Syria has seen some important political and military developments in recent months. Russia, Turkey and Iran reached a deal in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan, to establish de-escalation areas and hinted for the first time that third party/neutral forces might be deployed to monitor those security zones. Sensing an opportunity in the relative calm brought about by Astana Agreement in northern, central and southern Syria, Assad regime and its allies have started a military offensive in eastern Syria to establish a link between Damascus and remote provinces of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa and take control of the strategic border crossings.

On 8 May, 2017, Trump administration approved extension of military assistance in the shape of mortars, machine guns, ammunition and light-armored vehicles to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab forces, in their fight against ISIS<sup>1</sup>. America has been fighting ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. After a grueling fight of nine months, American and Iraqi forces have 'liberated' Mosul, leaving behind a heap of collapsed building, debris and displaced people. The symbolic and military value of Mosul is immense. It was in Mosul when Abu Bakr Bagdadi declared a caliphate in 2004 in Al-Nuri mosque<sup>2</sup>. The latter was rigged with explosives and destroyed by fleeing fighters of ISIS when they saw the end of their control over Mosul. Trying to emulate the victory over ISIS in Iraq, on 6 June, 2017, America with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

launched an offensive to dislodge ISIS from Raqqa, its de facto capital in Syria<sup>3</sup>. The simultaneous offensives of Syrian government and its allies and American forces and their patronized militias have occasionally brought them against each other.

This research article discusses Astana talks, their terms of reference, issues that have been left unaddressed; how Astana talks are a reflection of changed security dynamics in Syria and have facilitated Syrian government's eastern offensive, an offensive that has occasionally brought them in direct confrontation with American forces. It will also be discussing a complex network of alliances and counter-alliances with different interests in Syria.

### **Astana Talks**

On 4 May, 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey reached a deal in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan, to establish 'de-escalation' areas in Syria. There are four de-escalation areas. Area one includes Idlib province, a stronghold of Syrian rebels, northeast of Latakia, western Aleppo and northern parts of Hama province. These areas collectively inhabit one million people. Area two covers northern enclaves of Talbiseh and Rastan in Homs. Area three constitutes Deraa, the birthplace of Syrian revolution, Suweida and Quneitra provinces. And the Damascus countryside of eastern Ghouta, the scene of infamous 2013 chemical attacks on rebels by Syrian government forces, makes the fourth de-escalation area<sup>4</sup>.

The draft text of the Astana agreement reads, "The Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federal Republic and the Republic of Turkey have agreed...de-escalation areas will be created with the aim to put a prompt end to violence, improve the

humanitarian situation and create favorable conditions to advance political settlement of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>5</sup>.” Calling this ceasefire, a ‘temporary measure’ of just a duration of six months, Astana deal not only creates de-escalation areas, but also envisages formation of ‘security zones’. Meaning, for the first time neutral or third party monitors might be deployed to ensure adherence to the ceasefire by the conflicting parties.

So far, with the exception of some violations, mostly by Syrian government, Astana agreement has been able to bring about a modicum of normalcy in the afore-mentioned war-wracked areas. However, the potential of the ceasefire becoming a springboard for a long-term political settlement of Syrian conflict is a contested proposition.

### **Problems of Astana Agreement**

Though Astana agreement memorandum claims to ‘create favorable conditions to advance political settlement of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic,’ the ceasefire agreement is signed neither by Syrian government nor by rebel forces. If anything, this is indicative of increasing leeway of foreign powers to shape political developments in Syria<sup>6</sup>. The 2<sup>nd</sup> clause of the Article 5 of the Astana agreement says, “the Guarantors shall take all necessary measures to continue the fight against DAESH/ISIL, Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with al-Qaeda or Daesh/ISIL as designated by the UN Security Council within and outside the de-escalation areas<sup>7</sup>.” DAESH/ISIL is geographically based in eastern Syria and does not have substantial, if any, presence in the de-escalation areas; but this is not true of al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda or groups having affiliation with it are deeply

enmeshed with the rebel forces in Idlib, Homs, Hama and eastern Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus. The dominant group of Tahrir Hayat al-Sham, which controls Idlib, a stronghold of rebel forces and a dumping ground of civilians and combatants fleeing government-controlled areas, is Jabet Fateh al-Sham whose links to al-Qaeda have been an open secret<sup>8</sup>. In eastern Ghouta Failaq al-Rehman, a Free Syrian Army-flagged group, has been giving battle to Islam Army, formerly led by Zahran Allous, to take control of lucrative smuggling tunnels. Failaq al-Rahman has been aided by Fustat Army, a coalition of al-Qaeda and other rebel forces. And the 'guarantors' were fully aware of this fact<sup>9</sup>. The separation between al-Qaeda and other rebel groups is not as clean as it is implied in the agreement, which gives Tahrir al-Sham an added incentive to torpedo and undermine the ceasefire. The rationale behind the inclusion of this clause is to try to make such an imaginary distinction a palpable reality by luring the opposition forces to gain regional and international recognition in lieu of severing ties with Tahrir al-Sham. Such an eventuality will weaken Syrian opposition by sowing further division. For quite some time Tahrir al-Sham has been one of the toughest militant groups fighting Assad regime. Moreover, it could possibly pave the way for an ultimate military solution against groups averse to be manipulated into maintaining the political and military status quo in Syria by calling them to be part of a sectarian and terrorist group.

Then at the tactical level, it will be very difficult to administer the de-escalation areas. Russian invitation to two Central Asian Republics to deploy monitors did not yield the desired outcome<sup>10</sup>. So far, no third party has shown necessary willingness to contribute troops in 'security zones'. Deployment of Iranian and Russian forces will considerably undermine the credibility and neutrality of security forces stationed in security zones to ensure compliance to the ceasefire agreement by

conflicting parties. As long as credible non-partisan forces are not arranged to monitor 'security zones', the chances of evoking confidence in the long-term sustainability of ceasefire will remain considerably low.

There are Syrian opposition groups that claim regime forces have used the fig leaf of negotiations to buy time or give justification to the altered military situation in the country rather than address core issues of political transition, removal of Assad and war crimes. The band aid of talks, without addressing the source of conflict, will inevitably prove be a lull before fighting again starts.

### **Political and Strategic Rationale**

Astana agreement is a reflection of changing security and political dynamics in Syria. Russian and Iranian interventions not only buoyed the sinking ship of dysfunctional Assad government but have considerably increased its chances of survival. The primary motive of protecting their ally has been largely served. Rebels were defeated in east Aleppo<sup>11</sup>, made to give up key enclaves in Homs<sup>12</sup> and Hama and combatants agreeing to move to Idlib. Thus, Assad's allies Russia and Iran were in a position to dictate their terms in negotiations with an emasculated and divided opposition.

Astana talks are a parallel negotiating track to Geneva. Unlike Astana, Geneva talks are based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for ceasefire and formal talks on a political transition in Syria and the establishment of a credible, inclusive and no-sectarian government within six months; free and fair elections under UN supervision to be held within 18 months, and a drafting of a new constitution<sup>13</sup>. A comparative study of the terms of reference of the two

negotiating tracks enables us to understand how an alternative platform for talks benefits Assad and its allies. Astana agreement gives Assad and his allies an opportunity to skirt these important core issues, vital for durable peace and negotiated settlement of the conflict. In addition to this, Astana agreement enables Syrian government and Russia to enter the next round (Round VI) of Geneva talks with greater diplomatic leverage and will inevitably push for incorporating its key points in any peace accord. The ambivalence of major powers of West in their opposition to Assad and his brutal regime and their fear of a perpetuating war and a turbulent Syria pushing more people to take the perilous and arduous journey to Europe goes to the benefit of Syrian government and its allies. It is likely they would reluctantly welcome any cessation of hostilities.

### **Politics of Borders**

A semblance of normalcy in western Syria has precipitated a scramble for eastern Syria. The two most important provinces of east Syria are Raqqa and Deir-ez Zor. The former is the de facto capital of ISIL in Syria, captured in 2014<sup>14</sup>, whereas the latter is a government-controlled area but has been under siege by ISIS since 2014, severing the land route between Damascus and the Deir-ez Zor<sup>15</sup>. The de-escalation areas in the northern, central and southern Syrian have enabled Syrian government and its allies to commit its stretched forces in east Syria to fight an increasingly beleaguered ISIS, dislodge it and fill in the vacuum. Syrian government and its allies have opened three fronts to buttress their weak position in eastern Syria. The central front is aimed at ending the siege of Deir-ez Zor and taking back full control of the city. Victory there would accrue to the Syrian government a huge number of oil wells, ending a crucial source of ISIS funding and simultaneously lessening its

own financial reliance on Iran and Russia<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, defeat of ISIS in Deir ez-Zor would not only restore lands it has lost over the course of revolution, but it would likely increase its leverage in negotiations over political settlement of Syrian conflict. The southern front intends to capture the two important border crossings: al-Bukamal and al-Tanf. The former is controlled by ISIS and the latter is in hands of US-supported rebel forces<sup>17</sup>. These crossings on Syria-Iraq border and Syria-Jordan-Iraq border are of great strategic significance for Syria and its ally, Iran. A contiguous land route from Tehran to Beirut passes through Baghdad and Damascus. The fall of Mosul will inevitably prompt shia militias to move against border towns of Tal Afar and Sinjar, still controlled by ISIS. A road linkage with Iraq necessitates control of the two border crossings<sup>18</sup>. The goal of the northern front is not to give Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), dominated by Kurdish forces, a free run in al-Raqqa. There have been some talk of 'freezing the existing divisions' in Syria, if not permanently partitioning the state<sup>19</sup>. To take full advantage of the time before such an eventuality, if any, materializes, Syrian government wants to retake as much territory as possible. It is important to bear in mind that with the exception of Syria's Lebanese border, all other Syrian borders are in the control of rebel and militant groups: ISIS, Syrian rebels and Kurdish forces. These military campaigns reflect the new realities in Syria, where Assad government is in ascendant and the chances of its survival have considerably increased, but ominously they also potentially contain the seeds of greater tension between regional and major powers.

When US launched 59 cruise missiles against Syrian air base of al-Shahyrat in Hama province, in the aftermath of a chemical weapon attack on Khan Sheikoun in rebel-held Idlib province, there was a sense that US administration under Trump would adopt a more aggressive posture in Syria<sup>20</sup>. Unlike Obama,

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Trump would be unpredictable. Though, the subsequent events have proved that it was more likely a one-off attack, aimed more at appeasing the domestic constituency than a reflection of a changing US policy in Syria<sup>21</sup>. US military policy in Syria has been to defeat ISIS with the help of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab forces, and some vetted groups of Syrian opposition. US has provided them with weapons and given them air cover in their campaigns against ISIS. Moreover, US Special Forces have also been deployed to train and fight alongside SDF and Commando Revolutionaries, an opposition group of 800 fighters.

Collaboration between Kurdish and American forces started when People's Protection Units (YPG) sent its ground fighters to fight ISIS and save Yazidis in the town of Sinjar, Iraq ISIS. US gave them both weapons and air cover. America also came to the help of YPG when ISIS attacked Kobani, one of the cantons controlled by Kurds in the north of Syria. The reluctance of America to commit a huge number of troops in Syria in its fight against Syria and divisions among rebel and opposition, have brought Kurdish forces to play a leading role in America's campaigns to fight and rout ISIS. The discipline and military mettle they have shown throughout their fight and their secular outlook have made them crucial allies of Americans. However, it has come at the cost of US' relations with its NATO ally, Turkey. The latter considers YPG a sister organization of Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a declared terrorist organization by US and other western countries and fears the gains of YPG in northern Syrian in the wake of revolution and subsequent civil war in Syria, will encourage Kurds in Turkey to wage their own battle against Turkey and the weapons provided to them by US will be diverted to PKK. Interestingly just a day before America approved to give weapons to YPG, a high delegation of Turkish military met their counterparts in Pentagon. It has been

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reported in the press that Tukey had been given assurances, including that America would make sure that weapons given to Kurdish forces would only be used against ISIS.

Until the Astana talks, USA and Syria, Iran and Russia were fighting on separate turfs. America focused on ISIS, substantially based in east of Syria, whereas Syrian government and its allies used their military might to defeat rebel forces in the north, central and south of Syria. But Astana agreement paved the way for Syrian government forces and its allies to initiate a military thrust in eastern Syria and it has brought them in direct confrontation with US.

On 8 June, 2017, a U.S F/A-22 shot down a Syrian S-22 fighter jet, killing the pilot. The pentagon released a statement saying Syrian jet had attacked Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) in the town of Ja'Din, southwest of Raqqa. Trump administration had approved supply of weapons to its Kurdish and Arab allies in its battle to defeat ISIS in Raqqa. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with American special forces and air support launched a major offensive against ISIS in Raqqa on 6 June 2017. Prior to that U.S had downed an Iranian drone hovering in Syrian airspace and targeted shia militias that were coming to attack US-backed group Maghawaer al-Thawra (Commandos of Revolution) in al-Tanf base. Despite the US claims that it does not intend to 'fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces' and its focus is solely on defeating ISIS, the fault lines and divergences of interests have the potential to yield undesirable results.

Downing a Syrian jet and attacking pro-government shia militias sends a message to Assad regime as to what extent America can go to protect its allies on the ground. The larger strategic rationale is to deny Assad government and its ally, Iran, an important border link with Iraq. Both sides are

scrambling to reach al-Bukamal and dislodge ISIS from it and take control of the border crossing.

## **Conclusion**

Politically Astana Agreement is, at best, a temporary measure to find a 'negotiated settlement' to a complex civil war without in any way touching upon the root causes that have brought Syria to this point. Astana Agreement may be reflective of an exhausted population pushed into passivity and welcoming any opportunity that brings about a semblance of relief, a faction-ridden opposition and an ascendant Syrian government, avoiding issues of political significance-political transition, elections and a new constitution-

Different scenarios can be imagined in the aftermath of Astana Agreement, the most ominous of which could be a greater level of tension and confrontation between the US forces and Assad government, by extension to Iran and Russia. Will US consider such a risk worth taking? Russia and Iran have the potential to undermine US interests in the region if the escalation level reaches a notch higher. US must be cognizant of the fact that US allies on the ground can only hold their ground if either they have US backing or come to a tacit understanding with Damascus. Does the US intend to continue to station and deploy its special forces in the border regions even after ISIS is defeated or leave its allies on their own after its primary goal of routing ISIS is accomplished?

Another alternative is a compromise between US and Syrian government forces and its allies to collaborate against ISIS, work in their separate turfs, accommodate each other's concerns rather than fight each other. The US and Russia already have a de-confliction hotline to prevent midair incidents between the two nuclear powers, indicating that despite their

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policy differences they do not want a direct military tussle. Earlier this month, Washington and Moscow agreed into a cease-fire in the southwest Syria and hinted at more cooperation between the two states to end conflict in Syria. The most significant recent political development has the ending of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) program to arm Syrian rebel forces. On July 19, 2017, Trump administration officially ended US military assistance to Syrian rebel forces, indicating an important shift in its policy of regime change and possibly opening up new avenues to jointly work with Russia.

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**Endnotes:**

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